

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM

I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Vol.5

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Cast of Characters

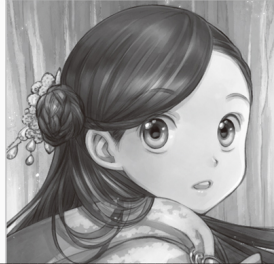
Summary of Part Four:

At the Royal Academy, Rozemyne has become both a problem child and a top-ranking student. She took ownership of the library's magic tools through a blessing, played aitter against a greater duchy, advised royalty on matters of romance, defeated a Darkness feybeast, and healed the Ehrenfest gathering spot, among so many other things. Meanwhile, at the guidance of the Sovereign knight commander, who knows that Ferdinand is a seed of Adalgisa, the king orders Ferdinand to leave Ehrenfest and marry into another duchy. Now, Ferdinand must endure a new life in Ahrensbach.



Wilfried

Sylvester's son, Rozemyne's older brother, and a third-year.



Rozemyne

The protagonist. She grew a little and now looks about nine, but she's the same on the inside and will do anything to read books. A third-year.

Ehrenfest's Archducal Family



Sylvester

The archduke of Ehrenfest. He adopted Rozemyne, making him her adoptive father.



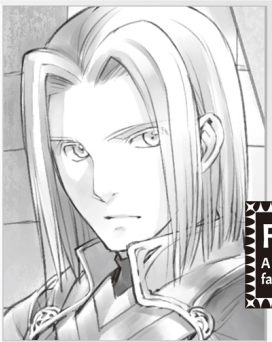
Florencia

Sylvester's wife and the mother of his three children. Rozemyne's adoptive mother.



Charlotte

Sylvester's daughter, Rozemyne's little sister, and a second-year.



Melchior

Sylvester's son. Rozemyne's little brother.

Bonifatius

Sylvester's uncle, Karstedt's father, and Rozemyne's grandfather.

Ferdinand

A member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree.

Rozemyne's Retainers



Otilie

Head attendant.
Hartmut's mother.



Lieseleta

Angelica's little sister
and a medattendant.



Gretia

A fourth-year apprentice
medattendant. Gave her
name.



Hartmut

An archscholar and the
new High Priest. Otilie's
son.



Clarissa

An archscholar.
Engaged to Hartmut.



Roderick

A third-year apprentice
medscholar. Gave his
name.



Philine

A third-year apprentice
layscholar.



Cornelius

Karstedt's son and an
archknight.



Leonore

An archknight.
Engaged to Cornelius.



Angelica

Lieseleta's older sister
and a medknight.



Matthias

A fifth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.



Laurenz

A fourth-year apprentice
medknight. Gave his
name.



Judithe

A fourth-year apprentice
medknight.



Damuel

A layknight.

Royal Academy Retainers

Brunhilde

.....A fifth-year apprentice archattendant. Sylvester's fiancée.

Muriella

.....A fifth-year apprentice medscholar. Gave her name to Elvira.

Theodore

.....A first-year apprentice medknight. Serves only in the Royal Academy.

Ehrenfest's Nobility

Karstedt

-----Ehrenfest's knight commander. Rozemyne's noble father.

Rihyarda

-----Sylvester's archattendant once again.

Leberecht

-----Florenzia's archscholar. Hartmut's father.

Oswald

-----Wilfried's former head attendant.

Lamprecht

-----An archknight serving Wilfried. Karstedt's son.

Elvira

-----Karstedt's first wife. Rozemyne's noble mother.

Nikolaus

-----Karstedt and Trudeliere's son.

Bertilde

-----Brunhilde's little sister. A candidate for being Rozemyne's retainer.

Brigitte

-----A mednoble from Illgner. Rozemyne's former retainer.

Lasfam

-----Ferdinand's layattendant.

Eckhart

-----Ferdinand's guard knight. Karstedt's son.

Justus

-----Ferdinand's attendant and scholar. Rihyarda's son.

Veronica

-----Sylvester's mother. Currently detained.

Royal Academy Associates

Gundolf-----Drewanchel's dormitory supervisor.

Hirschur-----Ehrenfest's dormitory supervisor.

Hortensia-----An archlibrarian.

Solange-----A medlibrarian.

Schwartz-----A library magic tool.

Weiss-----A library magic tool.

Rozemyne's Personnel

Ella-----Personal chef.

Hugo-----Personal chef.

Rosina-----Personal musician.

Temple Associates

Fran-----In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Zahm-----In charge of the High Bishop's chambers.

Monika-----A cook who helps in the High Bishop's chambers.

Gil-----In charge of the workshop.

Wilma-----In charge of the orphanage.

Konrad-----An orphan. Philine's little brother.

Lower City Associates

Benno-----Head of the Plantin Company.

Mark-----Benno's right-hand man.

Lutz-----A lehrer of the Plantin Company.

Tuuli-----Myne's older sister and personal hairpin craftswoman.

Nobles from Other Duchies

Hannelore

-----A third-year archduke candidate from Dunkelfelger.

Cordula

-----Hannelore's head attendant.

Adolphine

-----A member of the Drewanchel archducal family.

Ortwin

-----A third-year archduke candidate from Drewanchel.

Georgine

-----Ahrensbach's first wife. Sylvester's older sister.

Detlinda

-----A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.
Engaged to Ferdinand.

Letizia

-----A member of the Ahrensbach archducal family.

Sergius

-----Ferdinand's attendant.

The Sovereignty

Trauerqual-----The king. Carries the title of Zent.

Magdalena-----The king's third wife. Hildebrand's mother.

Sigiswald-----The Sovereignty's first prince.

Nahelache-----Sigiswald's second wife.

Anastasius-----The Sovereignty's second prince.

Eglantine-----Anastasius's first wife.

Hildebrand-----The Sovereignty's third prince.

Arthur-----Hildebrand's head attendant.

Raublut-----The Sovereign knight commander.

Loyalitat-----Vice commander of the Sovereign Knight's Order.

Immanuel-----The Sovereign High Priest.

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Prologue

Streaming in through the window was the warm spring sunlight, which made the plant life a more vivid green and the flowers a vibrant array of colors. It was the perfect occasion for a casual stroll, but the castle garden was empty of people; everyone was busy with the upcoming Archduke Conference. Some cut direct paths through the garden to save time, but none were taking in the scenery.

Bonifatius, like so many others, had no time to appreciate the changing of the seasons. In fact, seeing the increasing vibrancy of the garden made him feel worse—it was a painful reminder that they had so little time before the Archduke Conference. He advanced to the tea party room, taking care not to let his irritation show on his face.

He had told his attendants to arrange a meeting with Sylvester—there was something they needed to discuss—and they had eventually decided upon this lunchtime. It was clear how full the archduke's hands were from the fact that he was having his food brought to the break room right next to his office.

“Ah, Rihyarda...”

Among those preparing lunch in the break room was none other than Rihyarda. Only then did Bonifatius remember—she had returned to being Sylvester's attendant. She was an unusual retainer in that she changed whom she served according to the aub's orders. For the most part, she tended to members of the archducal family who were in difficult positions and struggling to get retainers of their own.

After being trained as an attendant by Gretchen, an old member of the archducal family, Rihyarda had followed the orders of the aub two generations ago and served Gabriele when she married in from Ahrensbach, then Veronica when the Leisengangs were ostracizing her. She had even been sent to Bonifatius's estate by Sylvester's father, Adelbert, the previous archduke. Bonifatius had asked for his son, Karstedt, to be tutored prior to his baptism, after

which he would enter the castle as an archduke candidate.

Then, after Karstedt was baptized, Veronica had requested that Rihyarda be assigned to Georgine, who had needed a tutor they could trust. Adelbert had accepted, and Rihyarda had become Georgine's head attendant. Later, when Sylvester was born, she had been made his nurse; as a male, he had taken priority to become the next archduke.

Sometime later, Rihyarda had come to serve Rozemyne as her head attendant. Sylvester had ordered it because Rozemyne was raised in the temple and would therefore struggle to find retainers, but Bonifatius had recently started to suspect that Sylvester had also wanted to prevent Rozemyne from socializing with her family.

"Welcome," Rihyarda said. "Lord Sylvester's work has taken him a bit longer than planned; he sent an ordonnanz just a moment ago and should be here soon." She guided Bonifatius to his seat, then directed the other attendants to serve him.

"It's his own fault, but Sylvester sure is busy, huh?" Bonifatius remarked.

"Indeed. He has never had so much work to do before. Do be gentle with him."

"I'm not as soft as Ferdinand. An archduke doing his own work is how things were always supposed to be."

Because of the purge, Sylvester was operating with fewer retainers than usual—but that was far from the only reason for his enormous workload. In the castle, Wilfried and Bonifatius were able to help with the duties that had previously been done by Ferdinand, but everything that was rightfully the work of an archduke had been dropped squarely in Sylvester's lap.

"Still," Rihyarda sighed, "I wish this hadn't happened so close to the Archduke Conference, when he's already so busy with his preparations..."

"You know, as the archduke, he could at least lend a hand in training Wilfried to take his place. Now that Rozemyne has outright refused to help the kid, she might even start dumping her work on him."

Bonifatius had supported all three archdukes—his father, younger brother, and nephew. Sylvester had come to him for help three years after becoming aub. He had wanted to push Veronica and her retainers into retirement, which he had intended to do by relieving *everyone* above a certain age of their duties. In the end,

Bonifatius and Veronica had stepped down from their roles, though they had continued to provide mana to the foundation.

Now, however, Bonifatius was anything but retired. He was frequenting the training grounds, drilling the knights, and helping with desk work—all to impress his adorable granddaughter and secure more opportunities to spend time with her.

Bonifatius had originally had a second, ulterior motive as well: if the Leisegangs had managed to establish Rozemyne as Sylvester's successor, then he could have spent so much more time with her under the guise of training her to be the next archduchess. However, he had given up on that idea after Rozemyne shot him down and said that she would rather stay in the temple. Getting time with his granddaughter was no easy feat.

"My, my..." Rihyarda said. "Training the next archduke is your job, Lord Bonifatius. As I recall, that promise was the only reason you managed to avoid taking the archducal seat yourself."

"Some history is too ancient to discuss..."

Rihyarda cackled. "A promise is a promise, no matter how long ago it was made."

Bonifatius grimaced on instinct; he often found it hard to deal with Rihyarda when she knew so much about his past. As she had said, he had once made a promise to his father, who had served as the archduke two generations ago. To avoid having to rule the duchy himself, Bonifatius had agreed to become an educator of archduke candidates and transfer his knowledge to the next generation. Adelbert had not been at all well, so he had needed someone to teach his son in case he died prematurely.

"Give me a break," Bonifatius grumbled. "I should be enjoying my retirement, but I've been helping out in the castle instead. I've even been educating Wilfried—which is more than I signed up for, if you ask me. Adelbert was sickly and *needed* support; Sylvester could easily manage by himself. I want to spend my time like any other grandfather: relaxing and doting on my granddaughter."

"How can you do that when you still don't know how to control your strength?"

Much to Bonifatius's frustration, everyone seemed to fear for Rozemyne's life the very moment he got close to her. People worked to keep them apart as much as possible.

I mean, I do feel bad about the time I got a bit too excited and almost threw her into the ceiling, but...

After that experience, Bonifatius had committed to memory that Rozemyne wasn't like his other grandchildren, who were always eager to train with him.

"You two seem to be having fun," Sylvester opined as he entered the room with his entourage. He asked Rihyarda and Karstedt to stay—as his attendant and guard, respectively—then told his other retainers to leave and eat lunch. They had an equally harsh afternoon to prepare themselves for.

Together, Bonifatius's attendant and Rihyarda presented their lords with plates of decorated vegetables. They introduced the dish as...

"Crispy-crispy launeide-and-sujaru salad"?

Bonifatius didn't recognize the name at all. Was it another new dish? Rozemyne's chefs *had* dramatically changed the castle's menu. After waiting for Sylvester to take the first bite, he tried what turned out to be a slightly sour vegetable.

Sylvester normally hates vegetables, but he's eating like there's no tomorrow. My granddaughter's recipes are the best in the world.

Bonifatius chewed the bitter vegetables—which young children famously despised—while silently praising Rozemyne. She had prepared them in a way that stopped even Sylvester from complaining.

"So, what's the issue?" Sylvester asked midway through the meal, the picture of exhaustion. "Concerned about something?"

"About *everything*," Bonifatius knew that he was about to increase the already tiresome burden on Sylvester, but only the archduke could resolve his grievances. "First of all, you need to whip Wilfried into shape. If his attitude doesn't change soon, I'm going to wash my hands of him."

Sylvester took a sharp breath, his eyes wide open. Meanwhile, Rihyarda exclaimed, "Lord Bonifatius! Such words are not to be spoken lightly!"

Bonifatius was in charge of preparing Wilfried to become the next archduke; by refusing to help the boy any further, he would essentially be declaring him unfit to rule. Bonifatius understood this perfectly well.

"His attitude?" Sylvester repeated. "What do you mean? He came to me with some complaints, but that was before Spring Prayer. He even ended up coming around. Is there still a problem?"

"Have his retainers told you nothing?" Bonifatius asked.

“They informed me that the Leisegang nobles treated him cruelly and asked that I reprimand them. Of course, I requested more details. I remember the Leisegangs as being rude but never particularly cruel.”

Wilfried’s retainers had in fact spoken to the archduke, but not about their lord’s work ethic. Instead, they had reported on how the Leisegang nobles had treated him during Spring Prayer.

“He recklessly charged into the homes of one Leisegang after another, including those who wish to use this purge to eliminate all traces of the former Veronica faction,” Bonifatius explained. “A giebe trying to contain those extremists could say that Wilfried was stirring the pot, and they wouldn’t be wrong. Why did you let him go?”

“Florenzia told me that, for him to gain more self-awareness as the next archduke, he needs to experience the consequences of his actions.”

A man’s decisions as the archduke could end up having a dramatic impact on the duchy he ruled, so it was crucial that he always be held accountable for them. That was why Wilfried needed more experience before assuming the role himself. Gathering intelligence was absolutely essential when it came to making the decision one considered to be most correct; only after choosing which information was trustworthy and the most accurate could one make an educated judgment.

Sylvester continued, “Spring Prayer is crucial to Ehrenfest; the duchy’s harvest is greatly dependent on the chalices we hand out. Plus, as with all such religious events, the onus falls on Rozemyne. As much as the Leisegangs might hate Wilfried, they wouldn’t risk doing anything to him. It was the perfect opportunity for him to experience their anger firsthand, in a safe environment—and to understand it more intimately than if we had merely explained the situation to him. It would also teach him the importance of gathering information... or so Florenzia said.”

“I see...” Bonifatius murmured, then crossed his arms. Such experience really was important for the next archduke. “But, as it turns out, this was too great a burden for Wilfried to bear. His work ethic has gotten worse since his return from Spring Prayer. Even after five days of warning him, his attitude has not improved.”

“A mere five days?!” Rihyarda cried. “Give him more time; we all come up short every now and again. Surely this isn’t enough for

you to cast him aside.” She was quick to protest, but she hadn’t seen Wilfried at work. “A mere five days” to her was “an excruciating five days” to Bonifatius and the retainers.

“The problem is not that he failed. Rather, he’s abandoning his duties as the next archduke and continuously flaunting his defiance. I cannot even begin to describe the foolishness of exposing one’s weaknesses to opposing nobles. Just how old is that buffoon?”

Wilfried was now approaching his fourth year at the Royal Academy, yet he was acting in a way that would have earned a newly baptized child a scolding. One had to wonder whether he was behaving so immaturely around the nobles of other duchies, and it went without saying that nobody would want to entrust Ehrenfest’s future to someone who acted so emotionally.

“Everyone is busy enough preparing for the upcoming Archduke Conference,” Bonifatius said. “If anyone should take the lead right now, it should be those of the archducal family who enacted the purge in the first place. Yet the next archduke is refusing to work and continues to be defiant even when warned. I can’t imagine what—if anything—must be going through his head. If nothing changes and everyone comes to despise him, then he will have brought about his own undoing. Does he not understand the severity of this?”

In the first place, Bonifatius was unable to give Wilfried too strong a scolding when they were in public. Doing so would risk making the boy look unfit to rule, which was dangerous when so many nobles already wanted Rozemyne to take his place. No matter how many times he was warned, however, Wilfried would only ever pout and say, “You’re only harsh with me because you want Rozemyne to be the next aub.”

Indeed, it made sense that Wilfried was reluctant to accept advice from someone who was supporting Rozemyne. For that reason, Bonifatius had asked Lamprecht to give warnings in his stead. Five days later, however, nothing had changed.

“Wilfried is proud to have stood among the top-ranking archduke candidates as an honor student, but those good grades won’t mean a thing unless he starts acting like a proper archduke,” Bonifatius concluded.

“You know, Florencia was worried about the same thing. She feared that his hard work was improving his grades and nothing else...” Sylvester said, bringing his spoon to his mouth while he

tried to remember the conversation.

Bonifatius grimaced. It sounded as though Sylvester wasn't taking his wife's opinion seriously. "It seems to me that Wilfried isn't the only one who needs to start listening more. Don't tell me you ignored a warning that important."

"No, no, I didn't ignore it. Her warning was why I relieved Oswald of duty. He wasn't giving Wilfried a proper education. It was also why I've started listening to the boy's complaints about how the purge has impacted his life."

Oswald was the embodiment of Veronica's methods, and it seemed that his manipulation tactics had only gotten worse after Wilfried became engaged to Rozemyne and secured his position as the next Aub Ehrenfest.

"Oswald took his work seriously and was completely loyal to Wilfried," Sylvester continued. "The problem was that he expressed this loyalty and carried out his duties exactly as he did during Mother's era. He never realized that what had once been marks of excellence were now marks of tyranny. Or, well... maybe he did and just couldn't change his ways. Perhaps he didn't want to change them. At any rate, to honor his loyalty, I gave him the option of resigning to save face."

Bonifatius had been told that Oswald resigned because of the purge, but now he knew the truth: the former head attendant had been relieved of duty after failing to give Wilfried a proper education.

"I sincerely hope that giving Wilfried a new head attendant improves things," Bonifatius said, "but his retainers are all too soft on him. Lamprecht even said to stop comparing him to Rozemyne."

"It was milady herself who first made that request..." Rihyarda said, referring to when everyone had worked together to help Wilfried catch up in time for his debut. "She said that my boy would end up crushed under the weight of the pressure."

Bonifatius paused, thinking back to all the times he had compared the two at work. "That's news to me. Still, Rihyarda... that was between his baptism and debut, wasn't it? How long will it remain relevant? At the Royal Academy, he's going to be compared to Rozemyne whether he likes it or not. Are his retainers really still treading on eggshells, even now that he's going into his fourth year?"

"Milady spoke as though it would always be relevant, but I do

not know how long it will actually stick. That said, indeed—it will not apply when it comes to other nobles.”

Rozemyne’s request had only been feasible when Wilfried was young and still receiving his education in the isolated northern building. It was inevitable that he would be compared to other archduke candidates at the Royal Academy, and people were guaranteed to focus on the quality of his work while he helped out in the castle. On top of all that, when he came of age, he would be compared to Ehrenfest’s other archduke candidates for the sake of picking the next aub. That was just how it was.

“Sylvester,” Bonifatius said, “if your son doesn’t intend to improve, then remove him from his position as the next archduke.”

“I would disown Rozemyne in the same breath,” Sylvester replied, narrowing his dark-green eyes.

Bonifatius sighed; he knew that Sylvester wasn’t bluffing. During this conflict with the Leisegangs, he had discovered the true reasons for Rozemyne’s adoption. She had been taken into the archducal family to save her from the tyranny of an Ahrensbach archnoble who had infiltrated the temple, to prevent Veronica from warping the lives of any more victims, and so that Sylvester could use her printing industry to bring the shaken duchy under one banner.

Even though Rozemyne had so many talents, Sylvester had absolutely no intention of making a child who wasn’t Florencia’s the next archduke. Bonifatius even recalled Sylvester telling him that, if making his granddaughter the next aub was truly his aim, he should have become the aub himself instead of running from his duty.

“How is Florencia?” Bonifatius asked, changing the subject. He still didn’t believe that Wilfried was speaking or acting as the next archduke should, but continuing his demands would get him nowhere.

Sylvester’s expression softened. “Her morning sickness has settled down, but she can hardly relax knowing that our kids are so busy. Even while she’s so unwell, she keeps trying to help with the workload, which only makes her retainers worry.”

“Could she not leave the conference preparations to the children and just perform final checks? Charlotte can more or less take care of everything else. She’s motivated and a fast learner.”

Anytime Florencia was feeling especially sick, Charlotte would go to the office where Bonifatius and the others worked to help out

and ask questions. On such occasions, it was obvious how hard she was trying to support her mother. At other times, she would apparently help Brunhilde with intraduchy communications and socializing.

“Charlotte’s working hard, while Brunhilde and Clarissa are going above and beyond to prepare for the Archduke Conference,” Sylvester said, looking relieved. “The silver lining in all this is that we’ll be able to attend without Florencia needing to overexert herself.”

Bonifatius merely nodded in response, his features drawn into a frown. He agreed that Brunhilde was a reliable helper—she had said that she was used to this manner of work after preparing for the Interduchy Tournament—and it was good that Florencia’s health was being taken into consideration. However, Sylvester’s relief was exactly why he was blind to the issue staring them all in the face.

“Brunhilde is now set to become your second wife,” Bonifatius eventually said, “but the duchy’s nobles still see her as Rozemyne’s retainer. That’s how they see Rihyarda too, for that matter. As for Philine and Clarissa, they’re working under Leberecht. It seems to all that Rozemyne is heavily involved in this upcoming Archduke Conference.”

“Well, they’re not wrong. She’s transcribing books and performing a Starbind Ceremony at the royal family’s request.”

“That isn’t what I meant,” Bonifatius replied. He thought that Sylvester sounded much too relaxed, and surely he wasn’t the only one who found it so exasperating. “You don’t even have time to go to the dining hall for lunch. Florencia is unable to rest, so Brunhilde and Charlotte are doing their best to support her. Rozemyne’s retainers are working so hard that everyone assumes she’s deeply involved with the Archduke Conference, even though she isn’t even in the castle. Melchior has declared that he’ll take her place in the temple. Everyone is proving themselves—everyone except Wilfried, who seems content with grumbling about how he was treated during Spring Prayer and shirking his duties in full view of so many others! I implore you, think for one moment how the nobles visiting the office must see him!”

Sylvester fell silent. The visiting nobles wouldn’t care about how the Leisegangs were treating Wilfried, nor would they care how hurt he was feeling. Their only concern was whether he was acting like and producing results expected of the next archduke.

"In the end, it falls to you to decide who should serve as the next archduke," Bonifatius said. "I don't have anything else to say about the matter, but know that I'm taking a break from educating Wilfried. There's no point rushing him when he cannot even complete the work he has been given. My time is better spent on my own duties."

"Alright. I'll warn Wilfried myself."

Wilfried was bound to acknowledge a warning from his own father, the archduke—that was what Bonifatius believed, at least. He relaxed a bit, relieved to have gotten one of his concerns through to Sylvester, then looked down at the plate of meat that had been put before him. He could tell from the browned skin that it was a bird of some kind, but he couldn't work out anything beyond that.

"This is crun-crun ju-ju farba, according to Lady Rozemyne."

"I see," Bonifatius replied with a nod. He knew what farbas were, but the "crun-crun ju-ju" part meant absolutely nothing to him. At the very least, it seemed that the names Rozemyne came up with often had repetitious onomatopoeia crammed into them. He had once asked whether they had something to do with the ingredients or how they were cooked, but not even the chefs knew. Rozemyne was naming her dishes in her own Rozemyne way.

Weird names aside, the recipes taste great, and my granddaughter remains amazing.

"Sylvester, have you heard any... *rumors* about Rozemyne lately?" Bonifatius asked. "I came across a few strange ones myself..."

"Strange rumors? Like what?" Sylvester replied. He turned to look at Rihyarda, but neither she nor Karstedt seemed to have any idea either.

"It would seem that those once of the former Veronica faction are saying—albeit only amongst themselves—that Rozemyne is in love with Ferdinand. They claim that she prioritizes him over her own fiancé, and the two apparently made physical contact when they reunited on the night of the Interduchy Tournament..."

Bonifatius hadn't been present to witness anything like that, but Sylvester and Rihyarda had. Surely they had noticed something. His anticipation soon faded, however, as the two merely blinked in bewilderment.

"On the night of the Interduchy Tournament...?" Sylvester

asked. "I don't know about that... You were with her, right, Rihyarda? Did you see anything?"

"I was with milady the entire day but saw nothing to warrant rumors. Rest assured, I would have reported any such behavior. At most... there was the medical inspection. He did technically touch her then, but only as part of a standard procedure to check on her poor health." She frowned and placed a hand on her cheek. "Was it Oswald who began that rumor? He certainly has a malicious interpretation of events."

Bonifatius blinked, surprised that she had made such a quick deduction. "What makes you so sure it was him?"

"By the time it happened, Lord Sylvester and the other student retainers had already moved to the dining hall to eat. The only ones present were Lady Rozemyne, my boy Ferdinand, our other guests, and the attendants serving their meals—Oswald and me."

Everyone understood right away. Rozemyne or Ferdinand certainly wouldn't have spread such a rumor, and that it was being circulated through the former Veronica faction meant it could only have come from Oswald or Wilfried.

"Yes, Oswald was most likely involved," Bonifatius said. "We shouldn't jump to any conclusions, however. It's possible that another noble happened to hear Rozemyne rejoicing about her reunion with Ferdinand, exaggerated the details, and then spread some deceptive rumor." A single malicious actor could turn even the most heartwarming news into something corrupt. And with that in mind, the rumor could have come from one of Rozemyne's retainers making an innocuous comment.

Sylvester looked contemplative. "Bonifatius, where's that rumor spreading from? Not the source, but the people helping it circulate. Is it really only about the night of the Interduchy Tournament?"

Bonifatius had already tried to investigate the matter, to no avail; the Leisegangs were too busy despairing about Rozemyne's refusal to be the next aub and her decision to stay in the temple to be of any use, while the nobles of the former Veronica faction were avoiding Bonifatius and his retainers for fear of punishment. Despite his best efforts, nobody had seemed to know anything.

"To be frank, I don't know either," Bonifatius said. "The most I can contribute is that, when I tried to warn Wilfried about all this, he said that Rozemyne was to blame for inspiring the rumor in the first place."

“What?” Sylvester put his head in his hands. “You mean to say that Wilfried is *substantiating* the rumor instead of denying it? That can’t be right. He can’t be that thoughtless. Karstedt, we’re going to look into this ourselves.”

From there, Bonifatius could extrapolate that the rumors were indeed only spreading among Wilfried and those of the former Veronica faction.

“Let’s assume for a moment that Oswald *was* responsible,” Bonifatius ventured. “Was it revenge for being relieved of duty?”

Rihyarda shook her head. “As I see it, Oswald *always* has Wilfried as his top priority. It appears more likely that he was only damaging milady’s reputation to protect his lord.” She believed that he had tried to drag down Rozemyne to divert negative attention away from Wilfried. All those present recognized it as a method that Veronica had employed often.

“That’s one troublesome kind of devotion...” Sylvester muttered, his face twisting in displeasure. Rihyarda nodded in agreement, then suddenly looked worried.

“However... Lady Rozemyne *has* grown quite considerably. Coupled with the fact that Lord Ferdinand is no longer in Ehrenfest, I think the time has come for her to reevaluate her relationship with him. A few words of advice might be in order.”

Rozemyne had spent so long looking more or less like a child, but now she actually looked old enough to be attending the Royal Academy. This was advantageous in many regards, but a lot of things that had once been permitted due to her young appearance were now no longer acceptable. She could no longer be afforded the same leeway.

Let’s just hope Rozemyne doesn’t end up like Georgine.

Bonifatius crossed his arms as he reflected on the past. Veronica had been nothing but ruthless when raising Georgine, all to ensure that Karstedt—a Leisegang—would never become the aub. The only person who had ever treated Georgine nicely and given her any respite was her uncle, Bezewanst. He had served as the High Bishop back then, which had caused problems when it came time for Georgine to attend the Royal Academy. As a noble, she hadn’t been allowed to have any connections to the temple, so she had immediately been forbidden from contacting him. This development hadn’t come as a surprise to anyone, but Georgine had been devastated nonetheless—something she had made painfully clear.

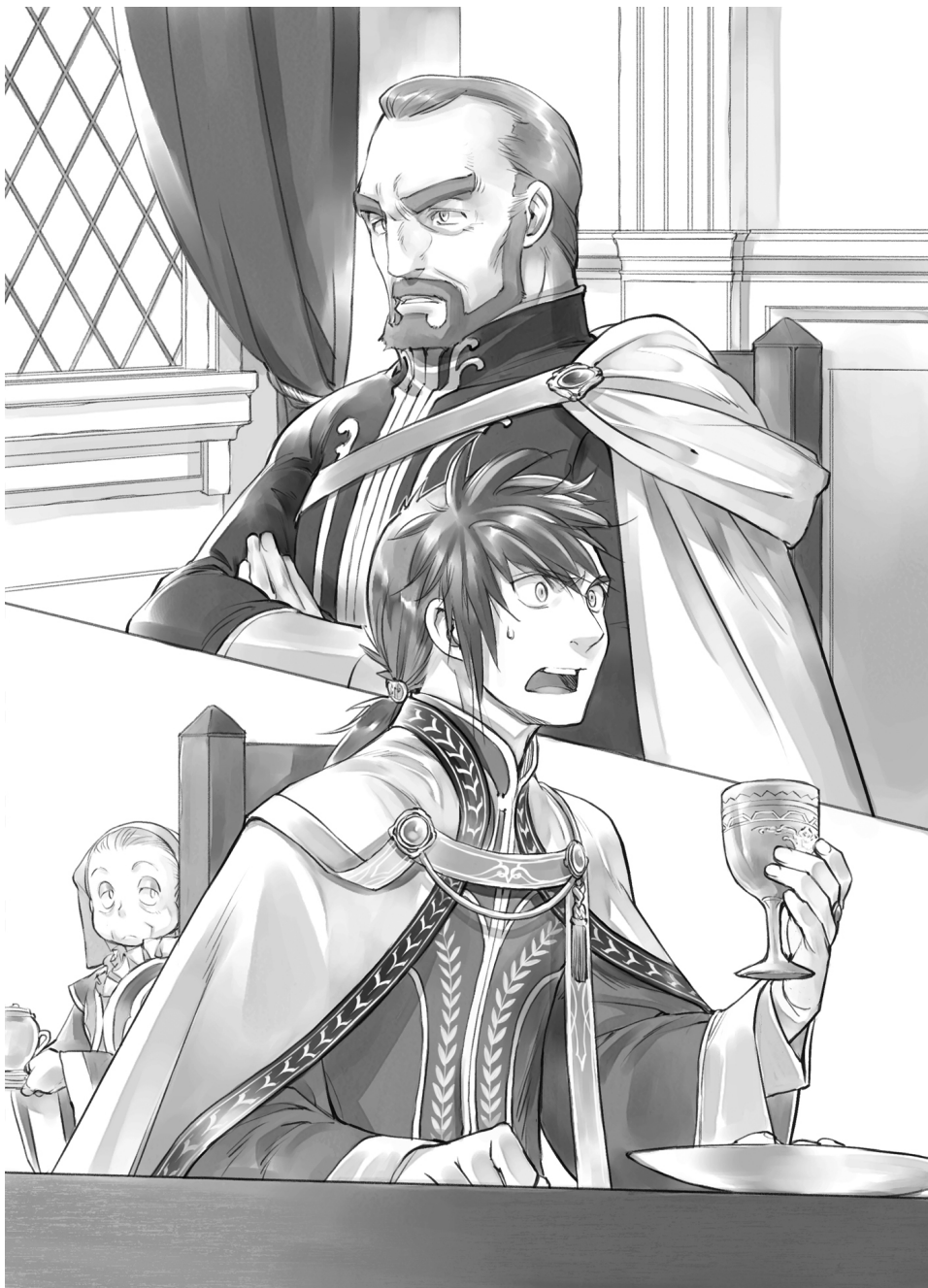
Bonifatius had wanted to extend a helping hand to his niece, but his first wife's relationship with Veronica hadn't been the slightest bit positive. Plus, with Georgine viewing Karstedt as an enemy, there hadn't been anything he could do to get closer to her.

This time, however, I'll do the right thing. I'll shower Rozemyne with all the love I've got!

Indeed, he would shower her with support to help her through the emotional torment of needing to take a step back from Ferdinand. But as Bonifatius was pondering how best to go about that, Sylvester spoke up.

"If people really are spreading those rumors, we'll need to stamp them out. Bonifatius, have you taken action yet?"

"No matter what we do, we're going to have a hard time putting out these fires without Rozemyne here. We would have noticed them sooner if she had been at the castle, and we would have responded faster too."



Rozemyne's retainers would have been quick to notice any strange rumors about their lady. Moreover, if she had been spending time with Wilfried in the castle, anyone trying to argue that she was closer to Ferdinand wouldn't have had much of a leg to stand on. As for Bonifatius himself, although the temple's reputation was improving with all the countrywide changes, he was still reluctant about leaving his adorable granddaughter there.

"Everybody knows Rozemyne for her brilliance and charm, so why keep drawing attention to the blemish that is her temple upbringing?" Bonifatius asked. "She would have done herself a lot more favors by leaving the temple to someone else and gathering support from the nobility."

"I thought the same," Rihyarda interjected, "but milady really does treasure her time in the temple. One should compare it to how apprentice knights staying in the knight dormitories are allowed to return home at regular intervals." She had started serving Rozemyne right after the girl was baptized, so if she said that Rozemyne valued her time in the temple, Bonifatius saw no reason to doubt her.

"Still, it's because she was raised in the temple that she needs to be taught how to be a proper first wife," he said, the Leisegangs' complaints coming to mind. "She should be socializing, not hiding away in the temple."

As far as the Leisegangs were concerned, their princess was being very uncooperative. Things had settled down a bit after Brunhilde's engagement was announced, but many houses still wanted Rozemyne out of the temple, and their cooperation would be crucial moving forward.

"Overseeing duchy industries is a job for aubs and scholars," Bonifatius declared. "You need to take charge of the printing industry with Wilfried at your side while Florencia teaches Rozemyne how to be a first wife. That's final."

Sylvester yelled. "If my workload gets any more unbearable, I'll seriously die!"

"You're a professional when it comes to shirking duties; I'm sure you'll discover a way to get some rest."

Rihyarda and Karstedt both grinned, looking equal parts amused and in agreement.

Upon seeing his retainers' smiles, Sylvester let out a displeased groan. He took another bite of meat, then scanned the room as he chewed. "I understand your point, Bonifatius, but it's too late to tell Rozemyne to come back from the temple. Her leaving now would only cause more problems."

"You'd need to do more work, sure, but would it really affect much else?"

The temple wasn't of much importance to Bonifatius; it was merely where people with desires too crude to mention in public went to have their needs met. Although it had changed somewhat over the past few years, it still wasn't a good place for someone as young as Rozemyne to be staying.

"It would affect our religious ceremonies, which would directly impact the duchy's harvest," Sylvester replied. "Consider also that our meetings with the merchants take place in the lower city—and nobody can deny that our business with other duchies has only been going so well thanks to the commoners' input. Above all else, don't forget about those children of the former Veronica faction staying in the temple; who will keep a close eye on them if not Rozemyne's retainers?"

"Ngh..."

He was right; they had spared the children of those criminals from execution, but the archducal family still needed to watch them closely. Rozemyne was compassionate to a fault when it came to kids, but Hartmut and her other retainers would remain vigilant.

"Speaking of which—her retainers are a problem too," Bonifatius said.

"You're going to complain about them as well as Wilfried...?" Sylvester asked, taken aback. Rihyarda and Karstedt looked equally surprised, but Bonifatius was more amazed that they hadn't noticed the issue themselves.

"Her retainers aren't even trying to encourage her to perform normal socializing. In fact, they seem to be purposefully avoiding it. This behavior is sullyng her good name among the Leisegangs, her power base. Something must be done."

Bonifatius had already tried to warn Cornelius, but the boy had merely replied that the old methods weren't applicable to Rozemyne. He had said that speeding along the generational shift and preparing to socialize like the top-ranking duchies took priority instead.

"I take no issue with this generational shift," Bonifatius continued, "but a future first wife absolutely needs to know how to perform traditional socializing. This new form to appease the top-ranking duchies can come later, once she knows Ehrenfest's own ways."

Indeed, socializing with the top-ranking duchies would most likely require a new approach, but Ehrenfest nobles would only respond to more traditional methods. They would serve as her foundations and stop the earth from giving out beneath her feet.

Still, Bonifatius persisted. "Rozemyne refuses to socialize here in Ehrenfest because she claims to be too busy with temple work, but her retainers have done nothing to remedy this. How can a first wife not know proper socializing? You should appreciate better than anyone the fate of an archducal family that no longer understands its people."

Bonifatius couldn't see a future where Rozemyne's shortcoming wouldn't cause her problems. He knew that being open to new methods was important, but how would she convince the other nobles to try them if she couldn't properly communicate with them?

"That won't ever be feasible for Rozemyne..." Sylvester said. "She was raised in the temple. And, after she was baptized, she received an education from Ferdinand, not the Leisegangs."

Ferdinand, too, had endured a particularly unique upbringing. His mother had passed away before his baptism, so he had entered the castle as an archducal family member without a support base to speak of. He had been ostracized by Veronica, the first wife at the time; raised without a chance to properly interact with other Ehrenfest nobles; and relegated to the temple after his father's death. One could hardly describe him as an expert on socializing.

"Milady works hard in her own way," Rihyarda interjected while setting a plate in front of Sylvester, "but there is much that she only understands on a surface level. She is by no means progressing as everybody hoped. My boy Wilfried is guilty of a similar cycle of errors; although he can mimic things, he seldom fundamentally understands them."

"You would install an archducal couple incapable of proper socializing?" Bonifatius asked. "I fear for Ehrenfest's future."

"Brunhilde is going to support them as my second wife," Sylvester replied. "Rozemyne's true strength comes from the fact that she surrounds herself with people who make up for what she

lacks.”

Rozemyne had very few adult retainers in her service, but her underage retainers were so well trained that it barely even mattered. Making up her retinue were Hartmut, who had been taught how to gather information by Ferdinand and Justus; her apprentice scholars, who were capable of negotiating with commoners; her guard knights, who had overcome their faults and gotten stronger; and her attendants, who could bring even top-ranking duchies to the negotiating table.

“Rozemyne is good at raising people,” Sylvester concluded. “Even I covet her retainers.”

Bonifatius paused in reflection. Damuel was a layknight, but he was gradually securing more mana through compression and was an expert at using it precisely. Judithe had been advised to prioritize her aim over her sword arm, and the rate at which she was progressing suggested that she had taken those words to heart. Angelica wasn’t the most thoughtful, but she loyally followed her orders and boasted lightning-fast reflexes. Leonore had a good memory and excellent leadership skills, which she put to use as a budding commander. And as for Cornelius, while he didn’t have any notable strengths, he didn’t have any weaknesses either, meaning he could easily fight alongside anyone.

These retainers had a common thread running through them: Rozemyne had advised them all and gotten them on the right path.

“I’m worried about her name-sworn retainers,” Bonifatius clarified, “but Rozemyne should be able to control them.”

“Right. They definitely could grow into problems.”

Bonifatius recalled when he and the children had investigated the estates of those name-sworn to Georgine. He had noticed then that those who had used name-swearing to avoid punishment by association had varying opinions about their position and contrasting degrees of appreciation for the archducal family.

“Not to mention,” Bonifatius said, “those old enough to remember when Veronica forced others to give their names came to view Rozemyne with the same fear and unease, even though she was saving their lives.”

“I don’t see why...” Sylvester said, looking annoyed as he started on his dessert. “I’m the one who suggested it.”

Bonifatius tried the dessert as well. It had an unusual yet intriguing mouthfeel, meaning it had no doubt come from his

granddaughter—and that thought was precisely the issue. “These days, everyone assumes that anything bizarre and original must have come from Rozemyne. Rumor has it that you were simply acting in support of an idea she came up with. And, since you dismiss your retainers when making such important decisions, nobody can confirm otherwise.”

“Well,” Sylvester murmured, “I suppose I came up with the idea *after* Rozemyne suggested that we spare Viscount Dahldolf’s life in return for his name...”

“Oh...?”

Ferdinand had been instructing the Knight’s Order and doing some work in the shadows, but Bonifatius hadn’t known the details. By the time he had even noticed, it had all been over, and the entire event had been covered up.

So it did come from Rozemyne...

“Name-swearing is not something to be forced on others,” Bonifatius noted. “The problem here is that some nobles now believe Rozemyne disregarded its true meaning as an expression of voluntary loyalty. Nobles who were around to witness Veronica’s distorted version of name-swearing even fear that the unfortunate tradition might rise again.”

Unbeknownst to the archduke, Gabriele, Veronica, and Georgine had together spent three generations demanding names as proof of obedience. Under normal circumstances, names were offered willingly and as a show of absolute respect; they weren’t some commodity to be traded in exchange for one’s life. Bonifatius had to wonder whether Rozemyne knew that her suggestion had twisted the intended meaning of such a noble gesture. At this rate, she was going to receive the same criticisms and reproach as Veronica and Georgine.

“It isn’t always the case that wild new ideas are ultimately accepted,” Bonifatius remarked. “We must advise Rozemyne to spend time as a regular noble and take steps to ensure that people don’t fear her.”

“I understand your point, but our current situation would be much worse if not for Rozemyne’s input,” Sylvester rebutted. “Her original ideas have saved us more times than I can count. I’m not going to make her stop completely. Instead, I’ll just take responsibility for her actions, whatever the consequences might be. Another bad rumor or two about me won’t change a thing.” Again,

he was speaking as though it were no big deal.

Bonifatius was overcome with a flash of irritation as he said, “Ehrenfest certainly won’t benefit from more crass hearsay about its archduke.” Would the considerate Rozemyne really be okay with her ideas damaging Sylvester’s reputation and forcing him to take the blame for any bad outcomes? He doubted it.

How much does she even know about all this?

Was Rozemyne being kept in the dark by her retainers just as Wilfried was by his? Did she need advice from a third party? Bonifatius crossed his arms, trying to imagine what fate would befall his granddaughter if she remained unable to socialize with even her family.

Apprentice Blues and the Orphanage Children

By the time Spring Prayer was completely over, it was midway through the season. The bitter weather had given way to vibrant greenery that seemed to thrive more by the day.

Amid the dazzling sunshine, carriages from the castle arrived at the temple's front gates. Their doors opened, and the children soon to be blue-robés gracefully alighted. Gone was the anxiety they had shown during their tour; instead, they were overflowing with vigor as they climbed the temple steps.

As an archducal family member, Melchior had come by highbeast rather than by carriage like the others. I welcomed them all as the High Bishop; henceforth, they would be living here at the temple.

"Right," I said, "let us go to the High Bishop's chambers and perform the fealty ceremony."

To become a blue-robe, one first needed to perform a rite wherein one would vow to serve the gods. It brought to mind memories of when I'd performed it myself, only this time I would be leading the prayers.

After swallowing my nerves and carrying out the fealty ceremony, I started giving the children their robes. Hopefully they would work hard and grow as people.

"Now, allow me to explain life in the temple."

Everyone would eat breakfast at second bell, then go to the High Priest's chambers with their attendants to receive work and instructions from Hartmut or his attendants. That was also when they would report on the day before and detail the progress they had made. From there, they would work in their chambers and study religious ceremonies until third bell, when they would move to the orphanage to study noble matters such as written lessons and the harspiel under Wilma's and Rosina's tutelage.

Fourth bell was lunch, then the children would generally be

allowed to spend the afternoon as they pleased. They could train; go to the workshop to help out or speak with merchants; transcribe books; study to be a knight, scholar, or whatever they wanted to be when they were older; study the printing and paper-making industries; and so on. They could even go to the castle, as long as they got permission first.

“Sixth bell marks dinnertime,” I said. “This is probably earlier than you are used to, but those in the orphanage would need to wait even longer if we took our meals any later. As for when you go to bed, however, that is up to you. Are there any questions?”

One boy raised his hand. “Are the children in the orphanage following the same schedule?”

“Not exactly. They must clean the temple, gather in the forest, work in the orphanage, and perform other such duties. That said, you will get to spend time with them during evenings when your work has been completed, and on rainy days.”

The coming of spring meant the orphans would be going outside more, which also meant they wouldn’t have as much time to study. I intended to have their work called early on some days so that they would at least have some evenings for studying, but everyone in the orphanage needed to be treated equally—hence why the blue-robcs would receive time off as well. No matter whether they were nobles, commoners, or the children of criminals, they would each receive as much work—and as much food—as the others.

“Can we go to the forest too?” Nikolaus asked, a hopeful glint in his eye.

I shook my head and plainly replied, “Blue-robcs are not allowed to go to the forest, I am afraid.” If we allowed the children of nobles to go and something happened to them, the blame would swiftly fall on the commoners—specifically Gil, Lutz, the eldest resident of the orphanage, and the guards who had allowed them to pass. I wasn’t going to take any chances.

“Now, head to your rooms with your respective attendants and get changed,” I said. “The children in the orphanage are waiting for you, so please make the most of this opportunity to spend time with them.”

To help the blue-robcs ease into their new lives at the temple, they hadn’t been assigned any work today. Well, they would need to tour the temple’s facilities after lunch, but that was about it. I’d

also wanted to spend a while introducing the Rozemyne Workshop's books, which were stored in the temple's book room as well as in the orphanage, but everyone else had rejected that idea.

They said that my impassioned recommendations would make the children less likely to read the books. Is that mean or what?

"Rozemyne, will you be going to the orphanage too?" Melchior asked, blue robes in hand.

I nodded in response; I wanted to hear the children's thoughts about spring life, since it meant leaving the orphanage more often.

"Shall we go together, then? There is something I wish to report as well."

Melchior then went to get changed. In the meantime, I asked Hartmut how work in the temple was progressing. Frietack had done his very best over Spring Prayer, but we still weren't up to date.

"Losing those blue priests has had a much greater impact than I expected," I said.

"But we now have new apprentice blue-robcs and can pile work onto their attendants," Hartmut replied with a beaming smile. "It was losing Lord Ferdinand that wounded us the most. Oh, have the specifics of the Archduke Conference's Starbind Ceremony been decided yet?"

"It seems that the Sovereign temple will prepare the divine instruments, offerings, and such. I will merely be holding our bible and wearing my ceremonial robes."

Each bible needed to be registered with its owner's mana, so you couldn't just borrow one from somebody else. Even if the Sovereign High Bishop had given me permission to use his, there wouldn't have been much of a point; so much of the text was invisible, it wouldn't be of any use.

"Do not forget your most important helper, Lady Rozemyne. I will be attending as High Priest to support you."

"I did not forget you, Hartmut; I simply knew that you would come along no matter what I or anyone else said." After seeing him force his way into the Royal Academy's ceremonies, I couldn't imagine a reality where he stayed in Ehrenfest and patiently awaited my return.

Next, I turned to my knights. "Speaking of the ceremony—the royal family has permitted me to bring some guards, but they *must* be dressed as blue priests or shrine maidens. I would like my adult

knights to accompany me, but are you all willing?"

"Absolutely," Angelica replied without missing a beat. "I am your guard knight, after all."

Cornelius and Damuel agreed as well; they had already worn robes for the Dedication Ritual. Leonore nodded too.

"Furthermore," I continued, "at the royal family's instruction, I am to spend the rest of the Archduke Conference hidden in the library's underground archive. I will need guards and attendants there as well, but only archnobles can enter. Cornelius, Leonore, I intend to ask you both to guard me, but Ottilie is my only choice for attendants. Would it be wise of me to give her this duty? I am particularly concerned about Clarissa."

Clarissa was due to attend the Archduke Conference, where she would play a key role in our negotiations with Dunkelfelger. We naturally wanted Ottilie to keep an eye on her, but that wouldn't be possible if she was accompanying me to the underground archive. It was a potentially dangerous situation, indeed.

"My mother is your retainer," Hartmut said. "It is only natural that she should join you. My father is going to be there as well, and Clarissa would never do anything to bother you. Well, probably not."

You had me in the first half... but what was that last part, Hartmut?!

As unease washed over me, Leonore smiled and said, "Fear not, Lady Rozemyne. Lieseleta may not be able to enter the archive, but she *can* take care of everything else, from preparing tea to managing your chambers. In my opinion, it would be best for Ottilie to join you."

At times like this, when I needed to leave the temple and carry myself as a proper noble, Rihyarda's absence became all the more painful. That said, the archducal couple had it a lot worse; they wouldn't get to hide away in an underground archive.

I sighed. "If only Damuel could read through the old documents with me..."

"From the very bottom of my heart, I am *glad* that I cannot enter an archive for royals and archduke candidates," Damuel interjected, trembling. "I would die of stress."

If entering an archive was too much for him, was he really okay with attending the two royals' Starbinding? He would need to don blue robes and stand atop the shrine in front of every single

archducal couple in Yurgenschmidt. The answer was probably no, but I decided not to say anything. Giving him a way out would leave me with one fewer guard on the day.

Well, I'm sure he'll survive. Good luck, Damuel.

"Because I'm underage, I wasn't able to help with Spring Prayer," Philine muttered, overcome with disappointment. "I won't be able to attend the Archduke Conference for the same reason. No matter what I do, I can't be of any use to you..."

"That isn't true," Damuel said, trying to cheer her up. "We need people to look after the temple while Hartmut and Lady Rozemyne are away. You're a huge help to all of us."

"I'm glad to hear you say that," Philine replied, her cheeks blushing crimson as she smiled up at him. Was she... beaming? She seemed positively radiant.

W-Wait, what? She practically has hearts in her eyes! Doesn't she like Roderick? I'm pretty sure Damuel said she likes Roderick!

As I stared at them in confusion, Melchior reentered the room, having finished changing. I would have liked to leave Hartmut here in his chambers so that he could continue with his work, but he insisted on coming with us to the orphanage; after witnessing me break and reform my feystone for the children, he was convinced that I might once again do something extraordinary out of the blue. I tried to explain that nothing was going to happen, but he refused to believe me. I couldn't understand why.

I started toward the orphanage with Melchior, walking at his slow pace. He told me that his reports about Spring Prayer had surprised Sylvester and that he had been praised for passing on the soldiers' messages.

"Right now, I'm memorizing the prayers you taught me so that I can join in with the Harvest Festival."

Everyone in the castle was up to their eyes in work, but there wasn't anything that Melchior could do to help out. This had made him feel useless and isolated, which had made him want to come to the temple as soon as possible.

"By the way, did you get a report too?" he asked.

"About what?"

"The silver cloth they found in the former Giebe Gerlach's estate."

Laurenz and Matthias had assisted with that investigation, but they hadn't yet reported their findings to me. They were on duty

tomorrow, and my intention was for us to discuss the matter then.

“Lord Bonifatius said that it was strange,” Melchior continued, “so the scholars examined it. Turns out he was right. Um... I didn’t really understand why, though. I thought you might be able to explain it better.”

Yeah... The most I know is that it was weird. There isn’t much more I can say.

I promised to give him a better explanation once I was abreast of the situation myself, and it was then that we reached the orphanage. Inside, we could see children in blue robes playing with the orphans.

“Melchior,” I said, “please go play with the others. I need to speak with Wilma.”

“Okay.”

I watched as Melchior mingled with the other children, then asked Wilma about the recent state of the orphanage. She shot a worried glance toward the stairs before she answered.

“Some of the children have lost motivation since the others left.”

The children growing up without magic tools of their own were having to expend their mana using the tools in their families’ estates. Most had assumed that only the heir of each house would receive a tool and be treated as a noble but, because everyone was gathered in the orphanage, they had soon realized the truth: some houses gave magic tools to the younger siblings as well.

“They had stayed strong by telling themselves that their families still needed them,” she continued, “but when nobody came, they lost the will to work hard.”

The disheartened children boasted more mana and status than the laynoble children who had been taken back, but they didn’t have magic tools. On top of that, they were no longer needed by their parents; even if they returned home, they would simply be made into servants and spend their time fueling their houses’ magic tools. Working hard in the orphanage wouldn’t magically turn them into nobles, so they were now wasting each day with their heads in the clouds.

“Hartmut,” I said, “even if the children were given their magic tools now, it would still be too late for them, right?” Konrad had needed to give up on becoming a noble after losing his.

“Not necessarily. It would depend on their mana quantities and

the number of rejuvenation potions they had access to. That said, forcibly rejuvenating one's mana and trying to force it all into a magic tool will place a tremendous burden on one's body, and the combined cost of the magic tool and the rejuvenation potions will not be cheap. It was by this means that the apprentice blue priests were returned to noble society after the civil war."

Of course, those apprentice blue priests had needed some financial support from their family to be able to afford the method. I had been on the verge of giving up, but I at least wanted to try Hartmut's suggestion.

"However," he continued, looking down at me, "I cannot allow you to shoulder the burden of preparing magic tools and rejuvenation potions for every child in the orphanage. You will only be High Bishop for three more years; we cannot continue to support abandoned children in that fashion once you are gone, and it would violate the orphanage's code of equality. Not to mention, what would drive you to go to such lengths for the sake of children from the former Veronica faction? If you stick your neck out for them, expect to be swarmed by families who believe their children deserve magic tools as well. Under no circumstances can you put orphans as your highest priority."

I clapped my hands together in realization. "Well, consider it from another angle: I am going out of my way to save not just those of the former Veronica faction but all of the children under my jurisdiction in the orphanage. It does not matter what faction they are from, nor whether they are nobles or commoners with the Devouring—I will assist them all, preserving the orphanage's code of equality."

"Lady Rozemyne..." Hartmut said, his eyes wide. Then he shrugged. "We cannot come to a decision ourselves; the aub must choose whether to execute your idea. Perhaps you could invite him to reobtain his divine protections."

Divine Protections All Around

“Sylvester. Grandfather. I’m glad to see you both.”

I had told Sylvester that I wanted to discuss something when he came for the ritual, and he had arrived with Bonifatius in tow. The latter’s distaste for the temple must have diminished since his previous visit.

Melchior and I guided our two visitors and their retainers to the High Bishop’s chambers, then gave them tea and sweets while asking about the castle. I had already received a report from Philine and Clarissa in my library, and my other retainers had given me information too, but it was important to hear things from a variety of perspectives.

Everyone in Sylvester’s sphere was fully dedicated to preparing for the Archduke Conference. He mentioned that I should praise Clarissa in particular, since she was working especially hard to get Ehrenfest ready for its negotiations with Dunkelfelger.

“Naturally, we can’t give her full access to everything when she’s only recently come of age and hasn’t even married into Ehrenfest yet,” Sylvester said. “Leberecht is limiting what information she’s given, and she’ll only be attending our discussion with Dunkelfelger. Still, her passion and attention to detail are inspiring everyone around her.”

Clarissa was approaching her work with almost obsessive fervor. I wanted to believe she was trying to make up for how much trouble she had caused us all, but Hartmut had revealed that she was actually just desperate to keep her place in the Archduke Conference group, since it was the only way she would get to see me perform the Starbind Ceremony.

Well, better than not being motivated to work, I guess?

“Together with some of the scholars, the Knight’s Order has been investigating the silver cloth found at the former Giebe Gerlach’s estate,” Bonifatius said. “Laurenz and Matthias have given you an overview, I assume?”

I nodded. He was referring to the same silver cloth that

Melchior had mentioned. When they first came to serve in the temple, Laurenz and Matthias had said that the cloth rejected any kind of mana, but they had told me little else; Bonifatius had apparently coerced them into silence so that he could report to me himself. In the words of my two apprentice knights, he had wanted me to invite him here to ask about the cloth. His bias against the temple was less extreme than before, but he still wasn't willing to come without a good reason or an invitation.

"Melchior told me first," I replied, "then I received a report from Laurenz and Matthias the next day. I still don't quite understand what the cloth is, though. I've been looking forward to hearing a proper explanation from you, Grandfather."

Bonifatius grinned. "We learned something new just yesterday. Sylvester's already been told, so we can discuss it while he's performing his ritual." He turned to Sylvester and started shooing him away. "Go on, then. Knowing what your memory's like, it won't be long before you start forgetting the gods' names again."

To his credit, Sylvester didn't get mad at all. "Desperate for some alone time with your granddaughter, huh?" he asked Bonifatius, returning a grin of his own as he stood up. "Ferdinand once said that a discussion with Rozemyne can boggle the mind, so yeah, I'll do my ritual first. Lead the way."

"Allow me, Father," Melchior declared, standing up in his blue robes. "I deliberately learned the way to the chapel and prepared the offerings so that I could assist you." Then, overflowing with motivation, he marched toward the door with his retainers.

Sylvester followed after him and said, "Tell me about the other kids. We can't really discuss them in the castle, can we?"

I turned to Bonifatius, so eager for his report that I was leaning forward despite myself. "Now then—do tell me about this silver cloth. Laurenz and Matthias told me only that it contained no mana at all; they said that I should ask you for any further details."

"Well, *this* is the cloth in question," Bonifatius said, and pulled it out for me to see. I asked for his permission to take it, then examined it closely.

The silver cloth was about as large as the palm of my hand. One side was smooth, while the other was frayed and uneven, indicating that it was torn. Otherwise, it appeared to be a normal piece of cloth. I didn't understand what was so strange about it.

"There's nothing unusual about it not containing any mana, is

there?” I asked. “Most of the clothes worn by commoners are made with such cloth. Even the mana-dyed kind that we nobles use slowly loses its mana over time.”

“The cloth you’re holding hasn’t simply been drained of mana, nor is its mana capacity too low for us to sense. Under such circumstances, it would have been possible to channel more mana into it or improve its capacity. Rather, that cloth contains absolutely no mana at all, and none can be poured into it.”

According to the scholars, the cloth had been made exclusively from manaless materials, using a process that likewise didn’t require any mana.

“Materials that don’t contain *any* mana...?” I asked. “This is my first time hearing of such a thing.”

Yurgenschmidt was enriched first with the mana of the Zent, then with the mana of the aubs and giebes across its many territories. In other words, everything contained at least *some* mana. One could make leather that didn’t conduct it, using materials from feybeasts or feyplants that were resistant to or reflected mana, but that was about it; the materials themselves still contained mana.

“The silver cloth found in Gerlach’s summer estate was deliberately torn,” Bonifatius said. “How strange that he would go to the effort when he was trying to escape and already short on time.”

“Perhaps he was in a rush,” I ventured. I’d assumed that he had gotten it caught in a door during his rush to leave the estate, but the looks on my knights’ faces implied that none of them agreed with me.

“In a situation where one’s cape gets caught in a door or the like, it would make much more sense to cut it with messer,” Cornelius explained. “Knights are taught to morph their schtappes as quickly as possible, and a weak scholar would surely choose a spell over brute strength.”

Tearing the cloth by hand wouldn’t have been appropriate behavior for a proper noble, and it would have wasted too much time during a last-minute escape. That was why it had caught Bonifatius’s attention.

In a situation like that, my commoner instincts would have kicked in for sure. Using my schtappe wouldn’t even have occurred to me.

“In that case, why was the cloth torn?” I asked.

“Remember how I said that it doesn’t interact with mana?”

Bonifatius replied. "It cannot be cut with a schtappe-formed weapon." He then signaled to his retainer and said, "Prepare the stand."

At once, the retainer placed the silver cloth atop some boards stacked on the table. Bonifatius used messer to morph his schtappe into a knife, which he then brought down on the cloth with unstoppable force. There was a booming *crash* as the boards shattered... but the cloth atop it hadn't even been pierced. It had done nothing to cushion the impact, but mana couldn't pass through it at all.

"You can see now why he tore it," Bonifatius concluded. "From there, the most troubling part of the cloth was its ability to pass through the border barrier."

"Excuse me?"

"The aub cannot detect the passing of small amounts of mana, such as that of commoners. You remember this, I expect. It follows, then, that a cloth through which mana cannot pass at all would not be detected either."

Curious, Bonifatius had decided to experiment. He had asked Sylvester to form a small, simple barrier, through which he had poked a finger wrapped in the silver cloth. Sylvester hadn't been able to detect it at all.

"So... the former Giebe Gerlach could easily have escaped the duchy?" I asked.

"Exactly. We believe he used this cloth to pass through the barrier. Questions remain, however. How did he get from the Noble's Quarter to Gerlach, and where did he get the cloth in the first place?"

I paused, racking my brain for answers. "Assuming he was completely wrapped in the cloth, could he have used a teleportation circle for objects?"

"No. The cloth contains no mana at all, so the teleportation circle would neither detect it nor activate. We tried ourselves, but nothing we wrapped in the cloth would teleport, no matter how small."

The scholars had apparently asked the same question and, using the cloth, tried to get living things to teleport as objects. They hadn't been successful.

"However," Bonifatius continued, "in the hidden room where we found the cloth, we also came across traces of something having

been burned. Matthias told us that his father would always burn any teleportation circles he used to commit misdeeds, so it seems very likely that he used one for something.”

“Father used magic tools to burn teleportation circles he had no further use for,” Matthias added. “I expect that he tried to burn the silver cloth as well, but its immunity to mana meant it was unaffected.”

Bonifatius crossed his arms and nodded. “Under any other circumstances, I suspect he might have been a lot more thorough about removing evidence, but he was in a room that only his blood relatives could enter. He likely never thought that Matthias would be spared, let alone that he would assist us with our investigation.”

“But aren’t relatives normally brought in to help with such investigations?” I asked. Matthias had been safe at the Royal Academy, so it seemed obvious that he would have helped out.

Bonifatius shook his head with a frown. “Opening a hidden room requires the mana of someone registered to it, so that might seem like a good idea, but such people would already be in mana-sealing bracelets. Removing said bracelets wouldn’t be an option either—by no means could we allow the relative of a criminal to enter a hidden room potentially filled with dangerous magic tools.”

The investigating knights wouldn’t know what magic tools were being stored in the hidden room or where they were being kept. Taking a relative there without the appropriate mana restraints would introduce all sorts of risks. Perhaps they would attempt a suicidal counterattack with whatever they had available.

“The best we could do by ourselves was look for evidence, and search through memories with the aub’s permission,” he explained. “Of course, the trug had greatly limited which memories we could access, and trying to view them by force risked doing serious harm to the person being searched—especially when their mana was ill matched and they were resisting the entire time. I expect that Giebe Gerlach believed he had eliminated everything that might trace back to his doings, including Matthias himself. I can say with all certainty that he did not expect his son or Laurenz to betray him to protect the children of the former Veronica faction, nor did it occur to him that the aub might offer to spare their lives. We could only include them in our investigation because they had given their names to members of the archducal family who had ordered them not to resist. They were extremely helpful, and their assistance

enabled us to find valuable evidence and items. There is no mistaking that.”

Bonifatius was showering Laurenz and Matthias with praise, but I could instinctively feel the mood growing heavier. I sat up straight, suddenly more anxious than before.

He continued, “You were so determined to save these young boys’ lives that you decided to use any means necessary. That led you to propose that the children of criminals be given a chance to give their names. The aub acknowledged your suggestion, and those who went along with it were spared.”

“Lord Bonifatius, I think you are mistaken,” Hartmut interjected. “To begin with, it was the aub who—”

Bonifatius raised a hand and silenced the protest with a single glare. “Rozemyne first made the suggestion for Viscount Dahldolf, did she not? She was acting out of compassion and was relieved when so many were eventually spared. She might even have considered it a good thing.” He inhaled slowly, then gave me a stern look. “However, I want you to know that, as a consequence, some believe you have stomped on the pride and dignity of others—that you threatened them with death to acquire their servitude. Name-swearing is supposed to be a sacred act. Even now, I do not support it being used to allow the families of criminals to escape punishment.”

I recognized those eyes; Roderick had given me the same look while saying exactly the same thing. My heart grew heavy. I didn’t regret saving Matthias and the others—not in the slightest. I was glad to have found a way to spare those who hadn’t committed any crimes. Yet, at the same time, I’d never really stopped to consider how they felt. I’d never considered the fact that I was stomping on their pride.

“Now that you have set this precedent,” he went on, “others will come forth, also wanting to swear their names to avoid punishment. It might even spread to other duchies; nowhere is there such an abundance of nobles that execution is a simple task. If swearing one’s name for this reason becomes common, then those who would have given theirs out of genuine fealty will start having second thoughts, lest they be misconstrued as criminals themselves. You will have fundamentally changed the meaning of name-swearing.”

It felt as though he had just dumped a bucket of cold water over

me. That reality had never even crossed my mind, and now I couldn't keep my fists from trembling. I'd never expected this to turn into such a big issue. My only intention had been to save lives—but, at the same time, I supposed that my own naivety was to blame.

"Sylvester always permits your unique ideas," Bonifatius said. "He even said that he would take the blame for any negative consequences they might have. In his words, his reputation is already so poor that a few new controversies would not change anything. Did you know that?"

I shook my head; Sylvester had never said anything of the sort to me. "I really am sorry... I didn't stop to consider the consequences..."

"Rozemyne, I see your desire to save lives as nothing short of a virtue, but you must consider both the influence your authority has on society and the damage that can come from modifying traditions. As I understand it, the implementation of so many seemingly minor changes over the years is why religious ceremonies and the temple in general are now viewed so poorly. You saw with your own eyes how much something as simple as a new High Bishop can change the atmosphere of the temple."

All of a sudden, Bonifatius seemed to relax. "But, uh... that's enough lecturing from me, I think. No need to shed any tears. In an ideal world, it wouldn't have fallen to me to tell you all this. Such remonstrations should come from your parents—of whom you have plenty—and your retainers share the blame for not daring to admonish you when you truly need it. I am sick of doing the dirty work and receiving so much ire for it." He then turned to my retainers and said, "Get a grip, you lot. Pay more heed to your lady's actions such that she doesn't make more enemies and turn the people against her."

"Our sincerest apologies!"

No sooner had my retainers cried out than a bell rang on the other side of the door. Sylvester's ritual was evidently finished.

"Ahaha!" he laughed, barging through the door with a victorious grin. "I got *twenty-one* divine protections! Coupled with the ones I got before, I might just beat you, Rozemyne!"

The tension weighing down on us all vanished, though we struggled to immediately match Sylvester's enthusiasm. "I... I see," I said. "I suppose all those years of prayer really did pay off."

“Not to mention, I got the Life element, so now I’m omni-elemental. I dunno how much prayer it takes to get new elements, but this seems pretty important, huh?”

If praying while supplying one’s foundation became customary for archducal families, I could only assume that we would *all* eventually become omni-elemental.

“Wait, omni-elemental?!” I exclaimed. “Does that mean you got Ewigeliebe’s divine protection?!”

“Nah, I didn’t get it from him but from the subordinates Dauerleben and Schlaftraum. There was also... Actually, um... Forget it. Not something to be said in polite company.”

Waaait. Let me guess... Beischmacht?

In socially acceptable terms, Beischmacht was most associated with *vigorous* nighttime endeavors. I wasn’t sure whether my guess was correct, but I wasn’t going to ask with Melchior in the room. Instead, I put on a vague smile and pretended to know.

“Anyway—they might have been subordinates, but I got plenty of Life protections from them. Did, uh... something happen, by the way? I heard your retainers apologize from all the way outside. What did Bonifatius say to them?” He carefully scanned the room, clearly more interested in changing the subject than anything else.

“I simply scolded them for not being on top of things,” Bonifatius replied, keeping the details vague. “Don’t want them thinking they can protect Rozemyne the way they’re going.”

I decided not to reveal too much either. So, rather than telling Sylvester that I now knew what great lengths he was going to for my sake, I merely offered him a seat and smiled as Fran poured some tea.

“Before my lecture, we were trying to figure out where in the world Giebe Gerlach might have gotten that cloth,” Bonifatius explained.

“I see,” Sylvester murmured. “Yeah, that’s important. It might be a new magic tool that hasn’t been announced anywhere.”

Umm... I’m not sure we can go about calling it a magic tool. It doesn’t contain any mana whatsoever.

Putting aside my pointless nitpick, I recalled what Giebe Kirnberger had said to me about Bosgeiz. “Erm, actually... I was told that feystones are seldom found in other countries, so maybe this material that doesn’t contain any mana came from one of them.” Manaless materials couldn’t be found in Yurgenschmidt, but

maybe they were available in other countries.

“I haven’t heard anything about this—not even during our Archduke Conferences. Yurgenschmidt was trading with other countries up until the civil war, but I don’t remember us importing any cloth like that.”

Bonifatius nodded in agreement.

“Well, feystones were one of our country’s chief exports before the civil war,” I said. “It wouldn’t surprise me if the countries receiving them went through a lot of changes too after their supply was abruptly cut off.”

Even back on Earth, when we had started running out of oil, we had desperately begun searching for alternative energy sources. It was an extremely obvious course of action to preserve one’s existing resources while searching for something new to use. If news of the Bosgeiz gate’s closure had reached other countries, then it was possible that they had started preparing for if their own gates were closed too. They might even have decided to keep their trump cards secret instead of presenting them during the Archduke Conference.

“If the former Giebe Gerlach is alive, I can’t imagine he went anywhere but Ahrensbach,” Bonifatius mused. “Plus, Ahrensbach is the only duchy that still has an open country gate. It might still have a connection to other countries.” He paused, clearly deep in thought, then shook his head and muttered, “This kind of thinking was Ferdinand’s job.”

“Then let us ask him,” I said. “He can look into whether Lanzenave has any similar cloth. Above all else, though, we need to inform him of the dangers in Ahrensbach. Giebe Gerlach might be there now, and this mana-immune cloth seems like a serious threat to us nobles. Not even Ferdinand would be able to put up a fight if someone used the cloth to block his every attack. He’s in more danger than any of us right now...”

Not to mention, although we had only found a scrap of cloth, it seemed reasonable to assume that the same material might have been used to make weapons and armor as well. If either Giebe Gerlach or Georgine had such equipment, well... One would need some very carefully thought-out countermeasures to stand a chance.

“Sylvester won’t object to us informing Ferdinand, I’m sure,” Bonifatius said. “However, if Ahrensbach’s censors pick up on our warnings, we’ll only make the situation worse. Do you have a means of passing their checks?”

I could only blink in response. Bonifatius was smiling at me, but his blue eyes were intently watching my every move. Sylvester was doing the same. It felt entirely like they were testing me—and, now that I thought about it, Ferdinand *had* told me to keep our shining ink a secret.

After putting on my best fake smile, I placed a hand on my cheek and quizzically cocked my head. “Is it not Sylvester who does? He said as much during dinner. The best I could do is perhaps ask Ferdinand’s disciple, Raimund, to give him a letter or a message from us when I return to the Royal Academy. Or maybe I could try to find a moment to speak with him at the Archduke Conference, during the Starbind Ceremony. Do you have any better ideas, Grandfather?”

Bonifatius’s expression softened a little, then he shook his head at me and said, “Nope.” Seeing the sharpness in his eyes fade away made me want to sigh in relief.

Sylvester looked at me and stroked his chin. “I’m sorry to say this, Rozemyne, but Ferdinand won’t be attending the Archduke Conference. Aub Ahrensbach passed away a few days ago, and now Lady Detlinde needs to dye her foundation. It’s best that her mana not change until the process is complete, so their Starbind Ceremony is being delayed until next year.”

Ferdinand had sent Sylvester a letter to that effect. In it, he had also mentioned that he would be participating in Ahrensbach’s Spring Prayer, which meant we would need to adjust our response a little.

“It’s being delayed an entire year...?” I asked. “Then what’s happening with Ferdinand?”

“What do you mean?”

“His wedding can’t be held until the foundation has been dyed, so will he be able to return to Ehrenfest? Or will they at least give him a hidden room?” I asked anxiously. Going an entire season without somewhere to relax was bad enough, but a whole year?

Bonifatius gave me a look of slight exasperation. “What’re you getting so worked up about? He won’t be able to return unless his engagement is canceled—and, in any case, it’s normal not to be given a hidden room until you’re married. Another year is a fairly long time, but it isn’t something for you to worry about.”

Um... Isn’t it, though?

My eyes flitted between Sylvester and Bonifatius, which elicited

a sigh from the former. "It seems that you don't have the best understanding of noble weddings," he said, then turned to Bonifatius. "I'll take care of this, Uncle. Why don't you go perform your divine protections ritual?"

"Hm... I suppose I will," Bonifatius replied. "Melchior, if you would." He left the room, though he kept glancing back at me on his way out. Once he was gone and the door was once again shut, Sylvester let out a heavy sigh, then looked me straight in the eye.

"Rozemyne, what's your relationship with Ferdinand?"

"Umm..."

I tilted my head, not at all sure where his question had come from. It seemed a bit late to be asking something like that.

"Shouldn't you know that already?" I asked. "Ferdinand is my guardian. He's someone who looks after me. What more is there to say?"

Karstedt, who was standing behind Sylvester as his guard, smiled in approval of my response. "I thought that might be the case. Ferdinand must feel the same way."

"Exactly. Was that not obvious?"

"Hmm..." Sylvester paused as if mustering his courage, then looked over everyone in the room, including our retainers. "By noble standards, Rozemyne... your relationship with Ferdinand is unusually close."

I nodded and replied, "Um, right..." but I didn't have a clue what he meant. To begin with, what were these "noble standards" he was referring to? Sylvester must have noticed my complete lack of understanding because, after exchanging a look with Karstedt, he attempted to elaborate.

"Look," he said, clearly struggling to get the words out. "The truth is... there's a rumor that you're in love with Ferdinand."

"This is news to me. I have no idea what might have caused it."

My response caused a stir among our retainers; some cleared their throats in apparent discomfort, while others exchanged surprised murmurs. Again, I was completely lost. Yes, it was true that I trusted Ferdinand more than I trusted any other noble. He was like family to me, and I loved him as much as I did Lutz or Tuuli. But was I *in love* with him? Where had that assumption even come from?

"Is there a reason for that misinterpretation?" I asked.

Karstedt's brow furrowed into a very reluctant frown. "Er,

well... It isn't too strange for a guardian to give his estate to his charge, but rarely are the staff and furniture kept the same. Ferdinand opted to leave the rooms as they were. He also put his valuables in your care and trusts you to send them to him as he needs them. It, uh... really is a bit much."

By managing the estate for Ferdinand and doing what he asked of me, I was apparently doing the jobs that most people would entrust to the women in their family.

"Excuse me...?" I said. "Eckhart and Justus can rely on Mother and Rihyarda to send them their belongings, but Ferdinand doesn't have a mother to do that for him, does he? Besides, the most I really do is tell the attendant he left behind what he wants. I don't see the issue."

It wasn't like I was personally loading his things for him. At most, I would send an ordonnanz to Lasfam, who would take care of the rest. How people could see that as even remotely romantic was beyond me. Plus, Ferdinand wasn't even living in Ehrenfest anymore; he had moved to Ahrensbach two seasons ago. Why were such rumors spreading now, of all times?

"Under normal circumstances, those who leave home to marry into another duchy take all of their belongings with them," Karstedt explained. "Ferdinand wasn't able to do that, though. Because he was summoned to Ahrensbach on such short notice, he had to leave his things here for another season."

That reminded me—Clarissa had gone to Frenbeltaag's border gate to pick up her belongings, and she had announced upon returning that she now had absolutely everything she needed. This wasn't really important, but my understanding was that people moving to another duchy didn't usually bring too many clothes with them; instead, they ordered new ones that better matched the fashion senses of their new home. They mostly brought underclothes, which went unseen and therefore didn't need to be stylish.

"By leaving his belongings at home," Karstedt continued, "Ferdinand is making it seem like he hopes for a divorce."

"Wait, really?" I asked. "Is his marriage going to be okay, then? We sent him more of his luggage in the spring, but only what he requested. His rooms aren't yet empty or anything." Naturally, I omitted the fact that Lasfam was eagerly waiting to be called over as well, once things were ready.

Sylvester stared at me, wide-eyed, and said, "I think *I* should manage Ferdinand's belongings from now on. Can't keep leaving them to you."

Karstedt looked equally taken aback.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Above all else, because Ferdinand ceased being your guardian when he moved to Ahrensbach. Now, seasons later, everyone sees your relationship in a different light. You should wise up and do the same. You aren't his charge anymore. He isn't your guardian."

There was nothing wrong with my receiving his estate; the issue was that our relationship hadn't changed after the fact.

Karstedt crossed his arms, frowning once again. "You're probably thinking that this has all come out of nowhere, but the truth is that our perception was just as naive as yours. It was only after people started warning us of the problem that we noticed it ourselves. You've also matured quite a lot—in a physical sense, that is. You've gotten taller, and now you actually look old enough to be attending the Royal Academy. Our knowledge of your situation made us slow on the uptake, but people no longer see you as a mere child admiring her guardian."

I gazed down at my body. The hem of my dresses had needed to be lengthened after I woke up from the jureve, and everyone had assured me I was now old enough to be a student... but nobody had treated me any differently. That was probably because, at the time, I'd looked as though I hadn't even been baptized yet. I'd even appeared to be younger than Wilfried and Charlotte, owing to our heights.

Now, however, the way that people viewed me had started to change. I'd celebrated the fact that I was growing at last, but I also hadn't realized how much of an impact it would have on how others saw me and the things I did.

"Also..." Sylvester hesitantly continued, "some people have been voicing their concerns that you are too worried about Ferdinand now living in Ahrensbach. They think you're not even half as worried about your fiancé."

"And they're right," I said. "If someone asked me whether I was more worried about Ferdinand or Wilfried right now, my answer would absolutely be the former."

Karstedt winced, while Sylvester smacked a hand against his own forehead and groaned. Had I said something wrong? I watched

them both carefully as they continued their display of exasperation. It wasn't long before Karstedt was face-palming and Sylvester was crossing his arms while staring up at the ceiling in thought.

After a moment, Sylvester returned his attention to me, evidently conflicted. "Look... could you *also* show some concern for your fiancé?" he asked. "He's facing Leisegang almost entirely by himself, you know."

"He has *some* of my concern. I advised him to let some time pass before approaching the Leisengangs, and I've actively tried to share my intelligence with him. However, no matter what happens, I will *always* prioritize Ferdinand."

"Why?"

I met his eye and said, "Wilfried may technically be my fiancé, but consider all the roles Ferdinand played for my sake. As my guardian, he did a veritable mountain of work in my stead. As my mentor, he granted me books, knowledge, and the perspective needed to survive in noble society. And, as my doctor, he paid closer attention to my health than anybody else. He has granted me so much, while Wilfried grants me almost nothing. We've also spent so much more time together."

To be frank, it was pointless to even compare the two. In terms of my appreciation, they were in completely different worlds.

"Not to mention," I continued, "although you say that Wilfried is fighting this battle alone, he has two considerate parents doting on him, as well as Charlotte and Melchior to provide assistance whenever he needs it. Even I can—and do—help him as long as it doesn't interfere with my temple work. How can you expect me to worry about him as much as I do about Ferdinand?"

I loved Tuuli and the others, but I didn't spend my days worrying about whether they had enough food to eat, whether their lives were in danger, or anything like that. Ferdinand, however, was stranded in Ahrensbach without a workshop or a hidden room. He was always up to his eyes in work and wary of everyone but the two trustworthy retainers by his side. Aside from them, there was nobody with whom he could speak openly. He also had a tendency to skip meals and go without sleep when he was busy. Even on the occasions when he did eat, he was so wary of poison that he refused to touch anything unfamiliar.

Worst of all, Ferdinand was engaged to a girl who looked *identical* to Veronica. Had he been living an easy and carefree life in

Ahrensbach, I wouldn't have needed to worry about him so much.

"Should the day come when Wilfried starts prioritizing work over his basic needs, all the while sustaining himself with rejuvenation potions and ignoring his retainers' every call to rest, *then* I will worry about him and Ferdinand in equal measure. But that hasn't happened yet, has it? In fact, I don't believe he's acting at all out of the ordinary."

Sylvester and our retainers were speechless, while Karstedt rubbed his brow and muttered, "So *that's* how you decide whom to be concerned about...?"

"Is there something wrong with that, Father?"

"Well, don't people usually base such priorities on familiarity or, uh... closeness? You're at an age where you should get along better with your fiancé than your guardian."

"So you were my age when you got *close* with Mother, hm?"

"Er, I, ah... Forget I said anything." He cleared his throat and averted his gaze, trying to avoid the subject, but that awkward gesture told me everything I needed to know; he *had* started getting cozy with Elvira around then.

Karstedt wanted me to behave more like my age, but that was exactly the problem. I'd spent twenty-two years on Earth before coming to this world, meaning I was now well into my adulthood. Wilfried, on the other hand, was still only a child. I struggled to see him as someone my age, let alone develop romantic feelings for him.

At the very least, he'd need to be as old as I was when I died.

"Still, aren't you worried about him?" Karstedt asked me. "You're aware of the trouble with the Leisegangs."

"Like I said, I do feel *some* concern for him. I attempted to share intelligence with his retainers and even made him a protective charm. He was anything but receptive, though. He refused to accept any information from me and wouldn't even thank me for the charm I gave him."

I'd expected at least a thank-you message delivered through his retainers, but no. He hadn't even sent me an ordonnanz to confirm that he'd received the charm. Was he pleased with it? Did he think I was overstepping? I didn't have a clue, and I certainly wasn't motivated to make him another. To be honest, I was so busy and saw him so infrequently these days that I sometimes forgot he even existed.

"He was definitely in the wrong there," Sylvester said. "I can't excuse him for that."

"Oh, also—I was going to advise him not to clamor for the Leisegangs' support and to instead take his time, but my retainers stopped me. They said that he was too wounded from what he had experienced during Spring Prayer and would only lash out at me in response."

Sylvester exhaled. "No surprises there."

"Chances are they weren't wrong either..." Karstedt added, sighing as well.

Everyone seemed convinced that the best course of action was to keep Wilfried in the dark. He was acting aloof, sure, but was that really the best response? I told Sylvester about the vague things Cornelius and the others had said to me, then launched into my main questions.

"So, what state is Wilfried in right now, exactly? Should I refrain from approaching him, as my retainers advise?"

Sylvester took a moment to consider his answer, while his retainers and Karstedt all watched with troubled frowns.

"For now... yeah," Sylvester eventually replied. "I think we can all agree that Wilfried needs to accept a few truths, no matter how unpleasant they might be. But I could also say the same for you, Rozemyne. I think the two of you should stay apart until you can both accept things for what they are."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said, cocking my head at him. "What truths am I refusing to accept?"

Sylvester's dark-green eyes looked straight into mine. "First of all, Ferdinand isn't your guardian anymore; he belongs to another duchy. Second, he's no longer expected to aid you; now that Aub Ahrensbach is gone, he needs to support Lady Detlinde while she begins dyeing her foundation. And third, to top it all off, you're engaged to Wilfried. I won't say it's wrong of you to worry about Ferdinand. I mean, I'm worried about him too. But you can't keep using that as an excuse to cling to him. As comforting as his presence might be... you need to let him go. You're going to spend the rest of your life with Wilfried, and the two of you need to start learning to support one another."

Okay... You've got me there.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, those were all things I would need to come to terms with eventually. It was tough, though;

I didn't want to end my relationship with Ferdinand. Even now, I could at least complain to him in my letters, ask him to discreetly teach me things, and simply take comfort in speaking with him.

"Rozemyne... it was nice to have Ferdinand looking out for you, wasn't it? He always paved the way forward or at least set you on the right path. Then he left, and you suddenly stopped meshing with people in the same way. Despite your best attempts to do things as he taught you, they never produce the same results. Am I right?"

"Yeah... Anytime I end up in a sticky situation, I can't help but think, 'Ferdinand would have stopped me before things got this bad.'"

His expression softened. "Same here. His departure really made me realize how little I was thinking for myself. But the sad truth is that he's never coming back to Ehrenfest. As much as it hurts, we need to accept that."

Clarissa had told me that Sylvester was in a disastrous state right now. In her words, he had underestimated the consequences of the purge and fumbled its execution. Well, she had phrased it more politely than that, but still. Little did she know, the true reason for the chaos was that we had initially intended to carry out the purge while Ferdinand was still in Ehrenfest. He had planned to contain the Leisegangs for us, and we had assumed that he would be able to help us with the cleanup before moving to Ahrensbach.

Of course, Ferdinand had ended up departing much sooner than anticipated, leaving us to manage the finer details and correct every minor mishap or miscalculation ourselves. Sylvester and I had always been deeply reliant on him, so doing everything for ourselves had been much easier said than done.

"Rozemyne, Wilfried is one of your strongest ties to Ehrenfest," Sylvester continued. "You need to do more to get along with each other. Getting close to him is one of the best ways you can prevent other parties from trying to claim you for themselves."

I nodded slowly. Unpleasant though it was, this was a problem I would need to resolve myself. "But what can I do to get closer to him?"

"For now... just pretend. You can start by acting like you're more worried about him. We need to put a stop to these rumors that you care more about Ferdinand than your fiancé."

He was asking for the impossible, but I responded with a

dispassionate “Okay.” How was I even supposed to make people believe I was worried about Wilfried...? Nothing about his situation seemed to warrant my concern. He wasn’t at risk of going hungry like the children in the orphanage, nor had he run away from home as Lutz did that one time. Perhaps I could support him as I did Tuuli whenever she was feeling anxious about her seamstress work, but he already had adult scholars to rely on. In fact, I didn’t think he was struggling with his workload in the first place.

Sylvester wanted me to show more concern for Wilfried than for Ferdinand, but that was a big ask. To begin with, I would need to send him an ordonnanz every day at dinnertime, reminding him to eat; stop by his hidden room every now and again to drag him back out into the outside world; and stay in close contact with his attendants to ensure he was getting enough sleep.

I imagine we’d fall at the first hurdle, though. I’d contact him at dinnertime, he’d reply that he obviously isn’t working so late, then I’d need to bite back the urge to tell him that he isn’t working hard enough then.

“So, what was it you wanted to discuss?” Sylvester asked.

I explained that some of the children in the orphanage had grown despondent and outlined my intention to prepare magic tools and rejuvenation potions for them.

Sylvester grimaced. “You don’t need to do all that. People consider it extreme enough that you spared their lives and gave them a home in the orphanage. If you do any more, they’re going to ask you to devote those resources to the children in their faction instead.”

He had said exactly the same thing as Hartmut, so I gave exactly the same response: “I merely wish to save the children of the orphanage I am expected to oversee. If we can provide for those who don’t have magic tools, then we can prevent more unnecessary deaths. If we leave them to their fate, it will be as though they were never even born.”

“The children won’t have enough money to cover the expenses, and you won’t be able to provide for them all. Last time we discussed supporting the children in the orphanage and playroom, you suggested using their parents’ money. I agreed. But these children don’t have magic tools for a reason—because their parents can’t afford to pay for them. How do you expect to fund this endeavor?”

He was right—we had only been able to support the other children because we were getting money from their parents. Even better, it was socially acceptable, since it reinforced the traditional idea that parents were responsible for their kids. That approach wouldn't help us in this case, though; if we wanted to start providing magic tools, we would need to adapt it.

“Well, I was thinking we could *loan* them the tools, then get them to pay us back once they're older and employed,” I said. We had already set that precedent by loaning the children of the former Veronica faction the money they needed to make it through the Royal Academy, on the basis that they would repay their debts after graduating.

Sylvester gave me a look of exasperation. “I can accept loaning a few years' worth of money to apprentices who can already work to support themselves, but you're suggesting that we saddle these children with an immense debt before they've even been baptized. You need to remember that living as a noble is expensive enough already, and people from the temple don't even have parents or relatives to rely on. How can you expect them to manage loan repayments on top of everything else?”

“Um... Well...”

“I was fine with saving those kids' lives, but I refuse to cover their expenses. They have mana, and if they can get by with supplemental funding and their own earnings, then having them stay in the temple as blue priests seems fine to me. I can't think of a single reason to make orphans without magic tools into nobles.”

“But...”

“Rozemyne, the possessions taken from the former Veronica faction were mine to distribute among my allies. That I gave the children you saved anything at all was generous enough, especially when those belongings could have gone to the nobles of our faction. Instead of asking for more, be grateful that I've already gone above and beyond for them. Just as Bonifatius said, you need to consider the broader consequences of your actions.”

Unable to argue, I merely hung my head in response. Helping the children wouldn't be easy. I didn't know what my actions might inspire or how far the consequences would reach.

I want to save them, but I don't know what the right solution is.

“Before you start getting caught up in things that shouldn't concern you, think about the things that should. Have you finished

preparing for the Archduke Conference's Starbind Ceremony?"

"We've already decided who's going to guard me and who will accompany me to the library."

"Good. Be back at the castle. You know when."

As we continued to discuss the Archduke Conference, Bonifatius returned from his ritual. He was slouching his extremely broad shoulders and generally looked upset.

"How did your ritual go?" I asked.

Bonifatius shot Sylvester a resentful glare and then muttered, "I received... seventeen." He was frustrated that he hadn't gotten as many divine protections as his nephew.

"Uncle, although we both started praying at the same time, I spent a lot longer offering mana when I needed to dye the foundation," Sylvester said. "That probably explains it. Anyway, which gods gave you their protection?" He sounded really eager, probably because he had ended up with some unusual protections after his own ritual.

Bonifatius grunted, clenching and unclenching his hand. "I turned omni-elemental too. Got most protections from gods about fighting. I'll need to head to the training grounds to test how much stronger I've gotten."

"Okay, Master!" Angelica exclaimed, lighting up at once. "Let's have a match right away!"

At the same time, Cornelius let out a howl. "At your age, why do you *still* care about getting stronger?!"

The Archduke Conference's Starbinding

"Is that everything?" I asked Hartmut, who was directing the gray priests as they loaded my Pandabus with luggage.

"Yes," he replied with a nod, brimming with confidence. "The ceremonial robes, the minor goods, the bible... Everything."

Next, I turned to my temple attendants. "Fran, Monika, Zahm—I entrust the temple to you in my absence. Please oversee the education of the new blue priests."

"Understood. We shall await your return."

"Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne."

"Thank you. Have all the preparations been made?"

It had been quite a while since I was last in the castle, but I needed to make sure everything was ready for the Archduke Conference before I reveled in being back. The adults accompanying me seemed on edge, maybe because I was having to perform the Starbind Ceremony and assist the royal family despite being underage.

"We have with us our attire and the goods we are bringing to the conference," I said. "Please do check everything. This box marked 'ceremonial outfits' contains the blue robes, though I don't know whose are whose."

This time, we weren't just bringing my clothes; we had ceremonial robes for my guard knights as well. Otilie and Liesele started checking through our luggage from the temple.

"These outfits are acceptable, though we will need to prepare extra ink and plant paper..."

"Allow me," Clarissa interjected, beaming at this opportunity to act as my retainer. "I assume *this* should suffice." She showed us a wooden box containing an entire day's worth of scholarly equipment. There was more than enough for us to complete our translation work in the library's basement.

“Hartmut,” I said, “you intend to join the negotiations as a scholar once the Starbind Ceremony is over, don’t you? Do you have all that you’ll require?”

“I will only be attending to obtain information and increase the head count, but rest assured—I am prepared enough that I shan’t tarnish your good name.”

Because of the purge, the archducal couple’s retinue wasn’t of an appropriate size for an eighth-ranked duchy. New retainers were being trained as we spoke, but they wouldn’t be ready in time for the conference, which was why Hartmut had agreed to participate after finishing his duties as the High Priest.

“I’m impressed that you managed to prepare while staying on top of your High Priest work,” I remarked. “As always, Hartmut, your excellence surprises me.”

“I am honored. Although, in this case... it was only feasible because of Clarissa and my father.” He glanced to his side, where his fiancée was standing with an expression that practically screamed, “I worked super hard.” I would probably need to consult Hartmut’s parents on how much she was exhausting them, but at least she was doing her best.

“The aub complimented your efforts as well, Clarissa. You and Hartmut are my only scholars participating in the Archduke Conference. I am eager to see your results.”

“Yes, my lady! You can count on us.”

Only adults could attend the Archduke Conference. From my retinue, that meant Ottilie, Liesele, Hartmut, Clarissa, Cornelius, Leonore, Damuel, and Angelica. Two attendants, two scholars, and four knights.

After our luggage was checked, I addressed the underage squad. “Philine, Roderick, visit the temple as often as you can. I want you to help Fran and the others take care of the blue priests, while simultaneously keeping an eye on the orphanage.” Their presence as nobles would also deter the adult blue priests from pulling any tricks.

“We’ve been so busy in the High Priest’s chambers now that Hartmut is training Melchior’s retainers,” Roderick said. “At least now we can relax a bit and work on our transcriptions.”

Poor, naive Roderick... If he thought that Hartmut’s absence was going to secure him some time off, then he was in for a very unpleasant surprise. A long to-do list was surely awaiting him in the

High Priest's chambers.

"Matthias, Laurenz," I continued, "please go to the temple on days when you don't have training. I would like you to assist Philine and Roderick, and check on how Nikolaus and the others are doing with their own training."

"Days we don't have training?" Laurenz repeated with a pained smile. "Oh, what a dream that would be. Lord Bonifatius is working us harder and with even more vigor now that he has so many divine protections."

Matthias looked at the sword on his hip. "We have also been learning how to deal with mana-immune silver cloth. The knights have been ordered to train with normal, non-schtappe weapons."

The discovery of the silver cloth had made us all the more convinced that the former Giebe Gerlach had survived. As his son, Matthias must have been dealing with a storm of conflicting emotions. His brow was drawn into a grave frown.

"We'll need them when it counts, but they're heavy and just get in the way most of the time," Laurenz added. "Am I right, Matthias?" He gave his friend a slap on the back, making him look up with a start and adopt a more neutral expression.

"We have only ever used feystone armor and schtappe-made weapons, which have almost no weight at all, so this silver cloth mystery is very troublesome," Matthias opined. "I intend to train to get better at using metal weaponry."

"Judithe," I said, "I want you to stay in the castle. I've received word that Brunhilde is visiting with Bertilde for her training, but I dare not leave Gretia to hold the fort alone. Some nobles are none too pleased with the name-sworn of the former Veronica faction..."

Otilie and Lieseleta were both accompanying me to the Archduke Conference, leaving Gretia alone in the castle. I couldn't imagine that asking for help from Matthias or Laurenz, her fellow name-sworn, would do the situation much good, plus there was Gretia's discomfort around men to take into consideration. A female knight like Judithe was the perfect match.

"Understood," she replied, accepting the job with a bright smile. "You can count on me."

"There won't be any problems while I'm in the northern building, but I thank you for your concern," Gretia assured me, lowering her gaze.

"Very well. But if staying in the castle ever becomes too much,

you can go to the temple with Judithe,” I said. Losing my liaison in the castle wouldn’t be ideal, but the last thing I wanted was for her to suffer.

After a good night’s rest, it was already time for us to go. The servants and chefs were the first to leave. Hugo and Rosina were among them, but Ella wasn’t even in the castle; she was pregnant and on maternity leave. The luggage was then sent box by box, while the scholars and retainers teleported over. I was to leave right before the archducal couple and would be sandwiched between Cornelius and Leonore.

“Be careful, Sister.”

“I wanted to see your ceremony too...”

After speaking with Charlotte and Melchior, who had come to see me off, I turned my attention to Wilfried. Sylvester had evidently been correct in saying that we were still in denial; aside from some perfunctory farewells exchanged over dinner last night, we hadn’t spoken at all.

I can’t leave things at that. It wouldn’t be right.

“Wilfried,” I said, smiling for the sake of appearances, “my ordonnanzes won’t be able to reach you from the Royal Academy, so I’m afraid you’ll need to go without my usual correspondence. Unless... shall we exchange letters?”

He blanched. “I’m just glad you’ll be gone for a while. I can finally be free from your ordonnanzes.”

“Oh, but I sent those out of concern for you.”

“You hound me about my work and meals every single day, from sunrise to sunset. It’s like you’re urging me to work *more* or something!”

As per Sylvester’s suggestion, I was trying to show Wilfried as much concern as I would normally have shown Ferdinand. This included sending him daily ordonnanzes, which he evidently didn’t appreciate. I was contemplating whether it was even worth continuing the endeavor when I saw him get jabbed in the side by one of his retainers. At once, Wilfried cast aside his upset frown and adopted a smile.

“I’m really worried about you needing to help the royal family in the underground archive, but do your best,” he said. “Remember that you’re representing all of Ehrenfest.”

“And you continue to supply the foundational magics,” I

replied. “Grandfather and the aub obtained many divine protections as a result of their dedicated prayer. If you let your guard down, Charlotte and Melchior may surpass you.”

Wilfried glanced over at Charlotte and Melchior, then... Nothing. I’d expected him to declare that he’d never lose or that he wouldn’t let his younger siblings beat him, but he didn’t say anything at all; he just stood there with a cynical smile. As I stepped onto the teleporter, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy about it.

“Lady Rozemyne, please relax until the rooms are ready.”

After arriving in the teleportation hall, which looked more or less the same as it did during the school term, I moved to the common room and waited while my attendants carried out the usual preparations. Rather than being filled with chattering students, it was awash with scholars and attendants whom I’d only ever seen during the feast where all nobles gathered. I was more familiar with the knights, at least—as was to be expected, since I saw them during trombe hunts, when blessing them to fight the Lord of Winter, and on other such occasions.

And, of course, the knights, scholars, and attendants gathered in the common room were all adults.

I must be the only shorty in the room... It makes me feel as though I don't belong here—which is entirely true, to be honest.

“Lady Rozemyne. Good day.”

Elvira approached me in full scholar attire, and we started to discuss our printing trade with other duchies. I sipped the tea that Norbert had poured for me all the while, and it wasn’t long before some very curious scholars in the business were gathered around us.

“Lady Rozemyne, these are the books the aub has permitted us to sell. As I understand it, Muriella has reported this to you already, but have those in the lower city been informed?”

“Indeed,” I said, “they have confirmed as much already. Furthermore, the Merchant’s Guild reported that the training of those from Groschel is progressing smoothly and they have more than enough product ready.”

Elvira nodded and then flashed a smile, an unmistakable glint in her dark eyes. “How goes the third volume of *The Story of Fernestine*?”

“As per the order, the Rozemyne Workshop and the workshops in Groschel are on pace to have it printed in time for summer. I am

unsure how much progress those in Groschel have currently made, but we have already completed our first copies in the Rozemyne Workshop. I have brought them to be presented during the Archduke Conference and will have them sent to your room later.”

“Oh my! I thank you ever so much.”

Just as Elvira gave me a giddy smile, the archducal couple entered the common room. Sylvester looked the same as always. As for Florencia, she looked much better than she had during the Interduchy Tournament; her morning sickness had presumably improved. Her belly was a little more prominent than usual, but not enough that anyone would notice she was pregnant at a glance.

Standing among their retainers were Rihyarda and Karstedt. I’d seen them last night during dinner, but it was always nice to know that they were doing well.

“Rozemyne, the Starbind Ceremony is on the first day,” Sylvester told me. “Don’t forget to prepare. As soon as breakfast and such is over, you’ll meet with the Sovereign temple in the auditorium where the ritual is being held. I know that working for the royal family won’t be easy, but I need you to see this through.”

“Right.”

After that, Sylvester and Florencia continued to their rooms. Their presence had caused the scholars to pause their work—I supposed that they hadn’t wanted to rush around in the presence of the archducal couple—but now they were busily resuming their preparations for tomorrow. The knights, in contrast, seemed a little bored. That went for my own knights as well; their only duty right now was to stand around the common room.

“Do the knights not have anything to do today?” I asked Cornelius.

“We held our meetings before we came here and won’t have much on our plates until the tea parties and other such gatherings have been scheduled,” he replied, also looking over the listless knights. There were far too many of them here in the common room, even for an important job like guarding the archducal family.

“If there aren’t any rules forbidding adults from using the Royal Academy’s gathering spot, perhaps you could take the knights there,” I said. “After getting the archduke’s permission, of course.”

“To hunt?” Angelica asked, immediately forcing her way into our conversation. Her face had lit up at the very idea. “I’ve heard that the feybeasts there have gotten much stronger due to your

blessings, Lady Rozemyne. I really want to go.”

The other knights really must have been bored; I noticed that most of them were listening in as well.

“I cannot go myself, since I need to prepare for the Starbind Ceremony, but I will at least be able to regenerate the spot on the final day of the conference. In other words, gather to your heart’s content. I would also ask that you bring some of what you collect back to me; I used up a lot of my materials while making everyone’s charms and am looking to replenish my supply. I can offer financial compensation.”

Angelica started to fidget, as did Damuel. Cornelius was still, but I could sense that he was raring to go; he must have wanted to get in on the action as well.

In response to their excitement, Leonore giggled. “I will stay to guard the room so that the rest of you can hunt.”

“Er, are you sure?” Cornelius asked. “You’d need to wait here on your own.”

“Yes, but I am sure you will gather for me the most wondrous feystone,” Leonore chirped with a beaming smile, seeming more lovey-dovey than I’d ever seen her before.

It was then that Lieseleta entered the common room to inform me that my room was ready. As I went there with Leonore, I noticed Elvira out of the corner of my eye; she was eagerly writing something down, looking as though she had just happened upon an excellent idea for a story.

Mother, please! Focus on the Archduke Conference!

“It was incredible, Lady Rozemyne!” Angelica exclaimed during dinner. “There were so many strong feybeasts. I’ve got more feystones than I can count!”

I really hoped she wasn’t speaking literally.

“I’ve never seen the gathering spot so abundant,” Damuel added. “The materials are so much better than when I was a student. I can’t help but feel jealous.”

Cornelius mentioned that it was even more enriched than when he was a student.

Oh yeah... That whole incident when I pumped my overflowing mana into the gathering spot happened after his graduation.

“I want to hunt every single day we’re here,” Angelica proclaimed.

“That won’t be possible, I’m afraid,” Leonore interjected. “You will need to guard Lady Rozemyne for the entire duration of the Archduke Conference. I shall accompany her to the underground archive. You must protect her in her room.” Her voice was cold and commanding.

“Yes, I know...” Angelica murmured, crestfallen. Only female knights could guard me in my room, and it would have been too unreasonable to ask Leonore when she was already due to guard me in the archive.

“My apologies, Leonore,” I said.

“Think nothing of it,” she replied with a smile. “Going with you to the archive is nothing compared to the unceasing training we’re put through at home.”

Beside her, Clarissa and Hartmut, the busiest of our attending scholars, were wearily having something to eat. “A gathering spot, blessed by Lady Rozemyne herself...?” Clarissa muttered. “I wish I could have seen it.”

“We can go after the Starbind Ceremony,” Hartmut tried to reassure her. “For now, you must pour your all into our negotiations with Dunkelfelger.”

“You can count on me.”

They were working hard—as were all of my retainers, in fact. I wanted to prepare some kind of reward for them, but I wasn’t sure what to choose.

The Italian restaurant is going to be much busier from this point on, and my retinue is so large now that I wouldn’t be able to bring everybody at once. Maybe something more material would do...

Alcohol was being served with dinner, which momentarily surprised me—it never made an appearance during the school term, for obvious reasons. The usual chatter had also been replaced with more serious discussions, perhaps because the archducal couple was in attendance. The scholars and attendants already had arrangements for tea parties and other such gatherings, and they were all deliberating who would meet with which duchy, and what meals and sweets they would need to prepare for them. It reminded me of the pregame meetings for the Interduchy Tournament and made me realize something—the tournament really was the preliminary stage of the Archduke Conference.

As I continued to eat, my eyes wandered to those who had been sixth-years when I first enrolled at the Royal Academy. They were

involving themselves in the conversations and suggesting ideas. Then, I returned to my room. Otilie helped me to bathe and informed me that she had delivered the new Fernestine volume to Elvira, who had apparently been “positively overjoyed.”

“Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger must be equally as restless; she said it was cruel of the author to end the previous book at the height of the drama,” I noted. It wasn’t hard to imagine her trembling in disbelief after finishing the second volume and realizing that the story was anything but over. “Hopefully our time together in the underground archive will give me a chance to let her borrow the new one...”

“You might only be going there by royal decree, but I am glad that you have found personal value in the task as well,” Otilie said.

My involvement in the upcoming Starbind Ceremony and my work in the underground archive were both the result of a royal decree. Under normal circumstances, someone as young as I wouldn’t be attending the conference at all. Otilie seemed to be fairly worried that I might collapse from stress.

“I must admit, Otilie... it feels strange being here with you instead of with Rihyarda.”

“Indeed. What are your plans for this winter? As you know, there are family matters I must attend to. Will you select Lieseleta to accompany you? My hands won’t be as tied once Hartmut, like my older boys, is married and settled, but until then...”

Otilie had a husband and one son who had yet to fully leave the nest. She also had the important duty of accompanying Clarissa on her commute to the castle. She had been able to leave home for the Archduke Conference, since everyone in her family was participating, but a long-term work trip simply wouldn’t be viable for her.

“Brunhilde is entering her sixth year at the Royal Academy next term, so yes, I think Lieseleta will do as my adult attendant. The problem is what comes next. She will doubtless start to feel the strain when Bertilde is my only remaining archnoble attendant.” It would be cruel of me to entrust business with the royal family and top-ranking duchies to second-year Bertilde, but there were some things that Lieseleta simply wouldn’t be able to do as a mednoble. “I suppose I will need to think about taking another adult archattendant... though that will not be easy.”

The purge had already done enough to diminish the noble

population, and the Leisegang nobles were assembling to serve as Brunhilde's retainers when she became the aub's second wife. It wouldn't be easy for me to find myself an adult archattendant.

Perhaps I should discuss this with my mothers...

The next day, after breakfast, I cleansed myself with warm water and then changed into my ceremonial High Bishop robes. Otilie and Lieseleta were helping me put on my last few accessories when Leonore and Angelica came in wearing their ceremonial blue shrine maiden attire.

Holy cow. They're way too beautiful. They might be protecting me, but who's going to protect them?!

"Aah, how wonderful..." Clarissa sighed. "It pains me that I won't be able to stand onstage with you, but I shall burn the sight of your ceremony into my memory from the audience!"

After receiving that fervent show of support, I made my way downstairs. Hartmut, Cornelius, and Damuel were waiting for me at the bottom, all dressed in ceremonial blue priest robes. They had rejuvenation potions and feystones hanging from their belts, while Angelica had Stenluke on top of all that. Hartmut was cradling the bible.

"Now then," I said, turning to Sylvester, "shall we go?"

"Yeah. Remember not to be rude to the royal family."

I nodded, and we started toward the auditorium. We exited the dormitory and made our way down the halls of the Royal Academy's central building. I was so used to the scenery outside the windows being completely white—ivory buildings blanketed in pale snow—that the sight of so much greenery caught me entirely by surprise. Vibrant flowers dotted the landscape, bathed in warm-looking sunlight and swaying in the gentle breeze.

"Springtime at the Royal Academy is a feast for the eyes," I said. "I'm so used to seeing an expanse of white."

"This is my first time seeing it as well," Leonore said from beside me. "It certainly is beautiful."

We soon arrived at the auditorium, which had been transformed as it would normally be for the graduation ceremony. At the far end of the room, by the shrine, I could see the Sovereign priests preparing for the ritual.

"Lady Rozemyne," came a voice. I turned to see a man approaching me—a man whom I recognized as the Sovereign High

Priest. He had attended the ternisbefallen inquiry during my second year, and I could still picture the scary look that had entered his eyes when I made Flutrane's staff. I couldn't remember his name, though.

"I, Immanuel, will serve as your High Priest for today. I consider it a blessing to behold with mine own eyes the famed Saint of Ehrenfest as she performs a religious ceremony."

Oh, right. Immanuel. How could I forget?

His gray eyes glinted with the same feverish light as before and seemed unusually... unfocused. I took an instinctive step back and grabbed the nearest sleeve.

"Lady Rozemyne?"

I gazed up expecting to see Ferdinand, only to realize that I was clinging to Hartmut instead. "Uh... my mistake." I let go of his sleeve, then returned my focus to Immanuel and said, "I see the shrine has been prepared."

"We will soon be ready for the ceremony—though it would appear that you have yet to finish your own preparations, Lady Rozemyne. You do not have the crown of Light or the cape of Darkness."

I cocked my head at him, unsure what he meant. There were already statues of the Goddess of Light and God of Darkness on the shrine, the former with its crown and the latter with its cape.

"The shrine appears to have them already."

"I refer not to the shrine but to your own person."

"The High Bishop does not wear divine instruments during Ehrenfest's Starbind Ceremonies." In fact, they didn't wear divine instruments during *any* ceremonies or rituals. At most, they held the chalice for Spring Prayer.

"How lamentable..." Immanuel said with a heavy sigh, then shook his head. "Lady Eglantine assured us that Ehrenfest had preserved its ancient religious customs, but how can that be when you know not of such basic arrangements? Does your bible not detail the steps of this ceremony?"

"At the very least, it does not mention High Bishops needing to wear divine instruments. I also spoke with Aub Ehrenfest about the Royal Academy's past Starbind Ceremonies, and it would seem that there is no precedent for what you are suggesting." Sylvester surely would have said something if the High Bishop had worn such bizarre attire during Prince Anastasius and Eglantine's Starbinding.

“We obtained this knowledge from an ancient text we discovered during the summer, which detailed the ceremony in question. We believed that such knowledge would already be in your bible, which is so much more detailed than our own. Perhaps it resides in a section you cannot read.”

Oh, right. We made it seem as though I couldn't read the whole thing.

Hartmut then entered the conversation. “If the High Bishop did not wear any divine instruments last year, then I see no reason for us to do things differently.”

“Oh?” Immanuel replied, then raised an eyebrow at him. “Listen well. As I am sure you know, Lady Detlinde activated a magic circle during her coming-of-age ceremony. Though none believe our claims that its purpose was to choose the next Zent, the fact remains that it appeared. Our texts in the Sovereign temple do not lie.”

From there, he launched into a passionate rant about the Sovereign temple's traditions, his gray eyes swirling all the while. “So that we might embrace the legitimate Zent with the proper ritual, we have begun investigating ceremonies at length. That is why we listened to King Trauerqual's request and decreed that the Saint of Ehrenfest would serve as today's High Bishop—for she has the power to perform proper rituals. If we were mistaken, then we have made a fundamental error from the very beginning!”

Mm, sounds like some stuff went down between the royal family and the Sovereign temple.

The royal family wanted me to bless the ceremony so that Prince Sigiswald would be recognized as the next king. The Sovereign temple wanted to revive old rituals in service of a legitimate Zent but lacked the mana that was necessary. It just so happened that their goals both required me to perform today's ceremony as the High Bishop.

“First, allow me to see this text you have found,” I said.

“That will not do. If you do not have the divine instruments, then seeing them will change nothing. The Sovereign High Bishop will suffice for a standard ceremony.”

Hartmut's eyebrow twitched; not only was Immanuel trying to cast me aside now that I wouldn't meet his demands, but he was also refusing to show me the text he was so determined to follow. I took a step forward before he could respond.

“Immanuel,” I said with a smile, while raising a hand slightly to hold Hartmut back. “I now understand the extent of your passion for religious ceremonies. If the Sovereign temple believes I should wear the crown of Light and the cape of Darkness, then wear them I shall.”

“Is that so?” Immanuel asked, his tone mocking. “But will you be able to make it to Ehrenfest’s temple and back in time for the ceremony?”

I shook my head and made my *schtappe* appear in my right hand. “No need. I can simply create them myself. *Finsumhang*.” In the blink of an eye, the cape of Darkness appeared. I threw it over my shoulders and fastened its golden brooch at my neck; then it automatically adjusted its length to fit me perfectly.

Immanuel gawked at me while I produced a second *schtappe*, cast *beleuchkrone*, and put on the golden crown it produced.

“This will suffice, I assume? Now, show me this text. I will need to see it before I can perform this ancient ceremony of yours.”

At once, Immanuel guided me to the High Bishop’s waiting spot near the shrine, then pridefully showed me the text in question. It was inscribed on an ivory slate, which looked almost identical to the ones from the underground archive.

“This is it,” he said. “I am unsure whether the text is legible to you, but...”

“It is.” I took the slate and dismissed the divine instruments; there was no need to maintain them now that I had the document.

“The divine instruments!” Immanuel exclaimed.

“It would be a waste of mana to maintain them unnecessarily. If, as you said, this slate mentions that they are required, *then* I will wear them.”

I scanned the text on the white tablet. An observer might have assumed that I was slacking off—after all, I was just standing here and reading while everyone around me was preparing for the ceremony—but there wouldn’t even be a ceremony unless I, the High Bishop, knew how to perform it. It was my *duty* to read.

“Eheheh. Eheheheh...”

Ancient language could be categorized into several distinct periods, and this text was written in a style that I immediately recognized; someone had presumably transcribed it from the underground archive. At the very least, it was written the same as the other ritual descriptions we had seen there.

Still, interesting to know that there are people in the Sovereign temple who can read this...

From what I remembered, there wasn't anyone in the royal family who could understand ancient language. They really would have benefited from a cooperative relationship with the Sovereign temple, but alas... Perhaps the Sovereign temple had rebuffed the royal family for its false Zent, or the royal family hadn't expected anyone from the Sovereign temple to be able to read the old texts. Maybe there hadn't been any communication between them at all.

In any case, the Sovereign temple would probably refuse to help in the slightest, even though the king is killing himself to sustain the country.

Putting all of that aside, as Immanuel had said, this text was certainly about the Starbind Ceremony. The simple description was identical to the one I knew, with the exception of the crown of Light and the cape of Darkness. The prayer was the same as well—and, since a single tablet could only hold so much text, it didn't take me long to finish reading it.

This is strange, though. In Ehrenfest, the Starbind Ceremony is a nighttime ritual.

According to the bible, the God of Darkness had wanted to bless the marriage of the God of Life and the Goddess of Earth. Their union had taken place at night to make the process easier for him. Ehrenfest had maintained that tradition, but the Archduke Conference's Starbind Ceremony was to take place at third bell. Personally, I thought it was a bad idea to hold a ceremony for the royal family during the day. The tablet didn't say anything about *when* it should take place, though, so my questions went unanswered.

"Is something the matter, Lady Rozemyne?" Leonore asked, leaning over.

I shook my head. "It would seem that the prayers and steps are identical, apart from the inclusion of the divine instruments." Then I returned the slate to Immanuel.

Well, whatever. Following these steps will satisfy the Sovereign temple, and the most I need to do for the royal family is bless Prince Sigiswald.

Although it seemed peculiar to be holding the ceremony in broad daylight, rescheduling it wasn't an option; the archdukes of every duchy had already arrived at the Royal Academy. Even

broaching the subject would be a waste of time.

“For now,” I said, “I shall inform the royal family.”

Satisfied with what I’d seen on the slate, I sent an ordonnanz to Anastasius, telling him that the Sovereign temple was trying to revive an ancient ritual and that they had asked me to assist them. “The text appears to be legitimate,” I said. “Do you think I should carry out their request? They have told me that, if we perform the usual ritual, they will get the Sovereign High Bishop to perform in my stead.”

The royal family were the ones who wanted me to bless the ceremony. As such, it seemed only natural that they should speak with the Sovereign temple themselves to decide which ritual was to be chosen and who would perform it. It wasn’t as though I *wanted* to be today’s High Bishop. In fact, now that I’d read that tablet, I didn’t even mind the thought of being sent home. I didn’t want to be wrapped up in a power dispute between the royal family and the Sovereign temple anyway.

“Stay where you are” was the prince’s response. “I will be there promptly.”

To my disappointment, it seemed that I would need to stay. I turned to Immanuel and Hartmut, who were discussing the ritual. They seemed to be in dispute about who would perform the High Priest’s duties. Hartmut kept double-checking the points at which I would need support, while Immanuel insisted that the Sovereign temple needed to maintain its presence through the High Priest.

“Is Rozemyne here?” Anastasius asked as he approached.

“Delighted to see you again, Prince Anastasius,” I replied. We greeted each other, after which I elected to let him and Immanuel decide what role I would play.

I won’t go out of my way to say this, since it would obviously anger them, but I think the royal family was too sloppy with its ordering around of the Sovereign temple. Just look at what a mess this has turned into.

The Sovereign High Bishop had performed these ceremonies for years without fail, so it seemed pretty obvious that he wouldn’t want some outsider swooping in and taking his place. To make matters worse, said outsider hadn’t even been informed of crucial details, which had resulted in her being scolded. If the royal family really wanted me to perform this blessing, the least they could have done was keep a closer eye on the situation.

Though I suppose it all just goes to show how little the temple thinks of them.

“So, am I to perform this ancient ritual or not?” I asked.

Anastasius paused, then said, “Yes. We are better prepared for an unexpected incident than we were with Detlinde. After all, even a fool could tell that, with you involved, something bizarre is bound to happen.”

The nerve. If he was so concerned about “something bizarre” happening, then why was I here in the first place? Had he forgotten that *he* was the one ordering me to do this?

“So, Rozemyne... what unusual consequences can we expect when you perform the ceremony clad in the divine instruments?” Anastasius asked.

“I don’t know.”

His eyes widened. “You said that you read the text, did you not?”

That was true, but the tablet had provided only an overview of the ceremony. It hadn’t gone into any considerable detail or mentioned what might happen, and it wasn’t like I could predict the future.

“I can confirm that it was about the Starbind Ceremony,” I said, “so the wedding itself should proceed without issue.”

My explanation elicited a drawn-out groan from Anastasius, but he eventually conceded. “As long as a Starbind Ceremony of some kind is performed, that will do. The aubs will be here soon... and we of the royal family will enter afterward. I must go for now. Stay here, and take care to keep between the lines.”

After watching Anastasius turn away and swiftly depart, his cape fluttering behind him, I observed the aubs steadily streaming into the auditorium. I could tell which duchies they were from by the colors of their capes. The occasion greatly resembled the Royal Academy’s coming-of-age ceremony, but with adults instead of students.

Loud chimes filled the air, indicating that it was third bell. Not everyone had entered the room yet, but those who hadn’t soon picked up the pace.

Once the colors of every duchy could be seen in the audience, Immanuel stood in front of the shrine as the High Priest and waved a magic tool covered in bells. The door opened in turn, and in came the royal family. There was the Zent, his first wife, Anastasius, and

Eglantine, and they all gracefully headed to their seats. For a moment, I wondered why the second and third wives weren't present, but then I remembered that only first wives attended the Archduke Conference.

The bell rang again, this time to mark my entrance. I stood up and made my way over to the shrine. An audible stir ran through the crowd; it seemed that not every duchy had been told that I would be performing the ceremony as the High Bishop.

I walked as quickly as I could while still being careful not to tread on my robes. Hartmut followed alongside me with the bible in hand, while my knights flocked around me in their ceremonial blue robes. It was an unusual sight, to be sure. The High Bishop would normally enter alone, but Hartmut's obstinacy and unrelenting insistence had resulted in our current formation.

Hartmut was extremely wary of the Sovereign temple. When its members had tried to argue that the High Bishop should enter alone, he had shut them down with a single argument: "Lady Rozemyne is no ordinary High Bishop; she is an archduke candidate as well." Then, afterward, he had approached my guard knights and said, "Your most important duty is keeping the Sovereign priests away from our lady. If anyone so much as touches her without permission, sever their arms immediately."

Of course, cutting their arms off sounds a bit extreme. Immanuel does creep me out, though, so I appreciate having everyone nearby.

I arrived in front of the shrine, at which point Hartmut gave me the bible. Leonore adjusted the hem of my robes for me, then stood off to the side.

Immanuel waited for us to complete our preparations, then narrowed his eyes slightly and gestured with his hand. He was signaling me to put on the divine instruments. In response, Hartmut signaled back at him, urging him to start without them; he understood just how much mana it required to maintain the instruments, so the later we could bring them out, the better.

There was a repetitive back-and-forth of waves as the two High Priests tried to out-stubborn each other. It wasn't long before some impatient muttering came from the audience, which spurred Immanuel to break the stalemate.

"The Starbind Ceremony shall now begin. Brides and grooms, enter!"

Five couples entered, with Sigiswald and Adolphine at their

head. The nobles clapped and cheered in support of the unions, giving rise to a most joyous atmosphere.

I wish I could have blessed Ferdinand...

He obviously wasn't among the group of couples, since his marriage to Detlinde was being delayed. This had been my one and only chance as well; the royal family had asked me here specifically to bless Sigiswald, so they were unlikely to summon me for any future ceremonies. People my age weren't even supposed to be here.

Come on, Aub Ahrensbach—why couldn't you have lived just a little while longer?

Ferdinand would have been able to marry Detlinde and receive a hidden room, while I would have been able to give him the largest blessing I could manage. In other words, I wouldn't have needed to worry about him as much.

His timing couldn't have been worse...

I sighed—but then I realized that I was the only sour face in the room and quickly forced a smile. I made eye contact with Sigiswald and Adolphine, both of whom had climbed up onto the stage, and gave them a congratulatory nod.

I slotted a key into the bible on the reading stand, opened it, and then turned the pages. A shriek that I recognized as having come from Fraularm echoed throughout the hall... but nothing followed it, so I began the ceremony.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Immanuel still signaling for me to put on the divine instruments, looking highly unamused. Unfortunately for him, the wait would continue; I needed to use a voice-amplifying magic tool when telling the biblical story.

He sure is being fussy. I made it clear that I'll wear them when I need to, didn't I...?

Ignoring his nonstop gestures, I used a voice-amplifying magic tool and started to tell the tale of the God of Darkness and Goddess of Light. The God of Life sought to marry the Goddess of Earth, and the supreme gods granted their permission. In the meantime, Hartmut and Cornelius prepared the same kind of magic pens I'd previously used to sign my name with my mana.

"Now, let us bless the birth of these newlyweds in the image of the gods," I said.

I took a step back, and my guard knights shrouded me behind

the large sleeves of their robes so that I could put on the divine instruments. At times like this, I appreciated being small; it made things a lot more convenient.

My reappearance wearing the cape and crown elicited quite a response from the audience. Immanuel gave a satisfied smile—he had probably been worried that I wouldn’t use the divine instruments at all—and I continued the ceremony.

“Come forth, Prince Sigiswald, the first of Zent Trauerqual. Come forth, Lady Adolphine, the daughter of Aub Drewanchel.”

The couple snapped out of their trance and advanced to the shrine. “Anastasius told me what was going to happen,” Sigiswald said, “but it still surprises me to see you wearing the divine instruments.”

“The shrine has identical copies; are yours from Ehrenfest?” Adolphine asked.

They’re both my schtappes...

I couldn’t admit that here and now, so I merely smiled, avoided the question, and presented them with a contract to confirm their wills. It disappeared in a burst of golden flames the moment they signed their names, as did the contracts of the couples who signed their names afterward.

“May the High Bishop bless these newlyweds,” Immanuel said.

I raised my hands and started to pray. “O mighty King and Queen of the endless skies, O God of Darkness and Goddess of Light, hear my prayers...”

All of a sudden, the golden brooch at my neck came apart on its own, and the cape of Darkness flew up to the ceiling without so much as a sound. As I stared upward, still in prayer, the cape extended in every direction and created its very own night sky.

“May you grant your blessings to the birth of new unions.”

Next, the crown lifted off of my head and up into the air, where it began to shine like the sun ablaze. The presence of the God of Darkness engulfed the auditorium, while the Goddess of Light bathed us all in her radiance.



Ah, the supreme gods...

They were here; there wasn't a single doubt in my mind. I continued praying to them.

"May they who offer their prayers and gratitude to you be blessed with your divine protection."

The night sky contracted into a single point, while the bright ring emanating from the crown began to spin. Immediately after, pillars of Darkness and Light shot up toward the ceiling and flew off somewhere; it seemed to be a pretty common occurrence during the Royal Academy's ceremonies, so I thought nothing of it. Most of the remaining light twisted around itself, overlapping and dancing through the air, and turned into a glistening dust that rained down upon the newlyweds. That part also happened when the ritual was performed in Ehrenfest.

Despite my initial concerns, I now understood why they didn't bother waiting until night to hold the ceremony here at the Royal Academy—as long as you were wearing the divine instruments, the night sky came to you.

There was the sensation of my schtappes going back inside of me, and with that...

It's done.

The ceremony was complete, as was the task that the royal family had given me. I sighed in relief and muttered, "Ceremonies here at the Royal Academy always end up being so much flashier than when they're performed in Ehrenfest."

"And so much more divine," Hartmut added with a smile. He was standing right next to me and was likely the only one who had caught my remark. He took the bible from its reading stand, then offered me his hand and said, "Let us depart while everyone is in awe."

An excellent suggestion!

Together, we moved into a break room near the auditorium. Hartmut handed the bible to Leonore, then ordered Damuel to pick me up and take me back to the dormitory as soon as possible.

"Lady Rozemyne," Hartmut said, "please allow me to borrow Cornelius for the cleanup and any incoming questions."

"Certainly, but..."

"You should take your leave now, before any troublesome

individuals appear. It might be a bit of a detour, but return through this door instead.”

Had they all planned this in advance? Angelica gripped Stenluke by the hilt, ready to fight at a moment’s notice, and took the lead as we started down the hall. Damuel was hot on her heels; I was still in his arms, trying to wrap my head around the situation; and Leonore was bringing up the rear with a reassuring smile.

“This is merely for safety’s sake,” Leonore assured me. “Hartmut is tremendously wary of Immanuel of the Sovereign temple. He described the man as ‘an incredibly dangerous fanatic.’”

I was told that Immanuel got an even more intense look in his eye the longer he spent with me, especially now that he knew I could wear the divine instruments and read the ancient language the royal family hadn’t been able to understand. Hartmut saw him as a genuine threat right now.

Well... for Hartmut of all people to have called him a fanatic, it really must be serious. Or, uh... maybe that was a little cruel of me. Hartmut never has the same crazed look in his eye as Immanuel, nor is he anywhere near as terrifying...

“It would seem he is planning to take you from Ehrenfest and put you in the Sovereign temple,” Damuel explained. “Their issue is that, while they can understand the ancient texts and gain valuable knowledge from them, they lack the mana necessary to actually perform the ceremonies. They wish to use yours to find the country a *true Zent*.”

Hartmut had ended up hearing this straight from the horse’s mouth. Immanuel had said to him that, in these dire times, what Yurgenschmidt needed more than anything else was a true Zent. He had proclaimed that Ehrenfest should support the Sovereign temple in its study of ancient ceremonies and that it was Hartmut’s duty as our High Priest to instruct Aub Ehrenfest to send me there. “A *true Zent must be obtained*,” he had said. “*For the sake of Yurgenschmidt in its entirety.*”

Hartmut had refused with a smile. “*I act only for Lady Rozemyne’s sake, and she wishes to stay in Ehrenfest.*”

“Well, can’t we just ignore them?” I asked. “We shouldn’t have much trouble dealing with the Sovereign temple.”

“Indeed, if we were only dealing with the temple, that approach would work,” Leonore said. “The problem is that the royal family is just as passionate about obtaining the Grutrissheit and a true Zent.

Nobody can predict what decrees might be made when these two groups' interests align. Hartmut is more concerned about that than anything."

Ehrenfest did not have the means to refuse a royal decree. Hartmut was of the opinion that the royal family was making too many demands of us, even while they doubtless understood the danger of such oppression.

"You may have a personal connection to the royal family, but still—never before have they made so many requests of a given individual."

It was also by their order that I was going to be reading documents in the underground archive. I was still underage, so I shouldn't have received permission to go there to begin with. I was also still a student, which made my involvement in these matters extremely unconventional. The royal family was making these requests of me even at the cost of breaking tradition.

Leonore gave me a troubled smile. "Hartmut would never tell you this, since he knows how much you look forward to visiting the archive, but he is very uneasy about the royal family's willingness to involve you in old ceremonies and order you to perform translations while you are already so busy with temple work and merchant business back in Ehrenfest. Although there is no helping a royal decree, your duties back home are far more important."

"I suppose..." I replied. Helping out in the castle would definitely benefit Ehrenfest more than assisting the royal family. I started to feel a bit guilty about how much I enjoyed going to the underground archive.

"Um, er..." Damuel fumbled, likely searching for a way to ease the oppressive atmosphere that had swept over us all. His eyes wandered, then he smiled and said, "You certainly have gotten heavier, Lady Rozemyne."

The silence that followed was deafening. It was obvious that he had meant to say something to the tune of "Oh, how you've grown!" or "You're so much taller now!" but being told that I was *heavier* was as pleasant as a knife to the chest.

"L-Let me down," I said.

"No, no, Lady Rozemyne," Leonore interjected. "Damuel... perhaps women avoid you because you say such cruel things to them?"

"E-Excuse me?" Damuel floundered, his eyes flitting between

Leonore and me. “I was just glad to see that Lady Rozemyne is growing...”

“I understand what you meant and that you intended to lighten the atmosphere, but telling a girl that she has gotten *heavier* is without a doubt one of the worst things you could say.”

“Sorry...” Damuel muttered, hanging his head. By looking so sad, he actually succeeded in lightening the mood—even if only a little.

We giggled as we turned the corner, but then Angelica came to an abrupt halt. Immanuel and several priests were blocking the hall ahead. Damuel gripped me tighter.

“Oh, Lady Rozemyne,” Immanuel said. “You seem to be in quite the hurry. I was hoping to thank you for performing the ceremony for us...”

“Indeed,” I replied. “I am feeling quite unwell from using too much mana, so I am in the process of returning to my dormitory. How shameful that you have seen me in such a state...” My explanation was little more than an attempt to buy time while I racked my brain for a way to get past their defensive line.

“Lady Rozemyne, the Sovereign temple contains many more ancient documents. Please, come and read them with us.”

I went to throw my hands up in celebration, but Damuel stopped me by swiftly tightening his arms around me.

Oops. Thanks.

“The royal family declares our documents to be fake,” Immanuel continued, “so they refuse to pay us any mind. We were hoping that you would read them and prove that we speak only the divine truth.”

“My apologies. I am so unwell that I cannot even think straight. Furthermore, I believe that such requests should be made through Aub Ehrenfest.” I then signaled Angelica with my eyes, telling her to advance. She nodded and continued onward.

“Allow me to show you a most excellent place to rest,” Immanuel said, and extended a hand to me. In the blink of an eye, Angelica had unsheathed Stenluke.

“If you touch Lady Rozemyne without permission, I *will* cut off your arm.”

Immanuel gulped. He must not have expected Angelica to be a knight, since she was still wearing her blue shrine maiden robes. Leonore took advantage of the shock and confusion to get past him,

with Damuel following close behind.

It wasn't until we were far away from the Sovereign priests that Angelica sheathed Stenluke again.

Work in the Underground Archive

“We practically blinked and you were gone,” Sylvester complained. “You didn’t even give us any notice. D’you know how much trouble that caused us?”

Apparently, after my abrupt departure, Sylvester and Florencia had been subjected to a barrage of questions by the nobles sitting around them. Pale-faced, they had repeated again and again that such information was known only to the royal family—but that hadn’t been enough. The commotion had followed them all the way back to the dormitory.

I was sitting in the common room, at Sylvester’s order, with literally everyone from Ehrenfest who had come for the Archduke Conference watching me. Being stuck with so many adults was more than a little intense; unlike the other students, they weren’t at all used to royalty-related matters and other strange incidents, so they were staring at me with stiff expressions.

Sylvester shook his head, exasperated. “Under normal circumstances, we would have spent the time after the ceremony weighing up the other duchies while arranging tea parties and meals, but that was obviously out of the question. I demand an explanation. The conference starts after lunch, and I’m not looking forward to it.”

“I incorporated into the ceremony some ancient practices the Sovereign temple found written on similarly ancient documents,” I said. “The Sovereign High Bishop lacked the mana to perform them himself, so the temple asked me to act in his stead. It was at the royal family’s behest that I agreed.”

From there, I explained the irritating exchanges that had occurred, and stressed that I had spoken to Anastasius before taking any action. I had been willing to leave the ceremony to the Sovereign High Bishop and go home, but the prince had personally opposed the idea.

“Today’s incident only happened because Prince Anastasius told me to oblige the Sovereign temple,” I said. “Thus, if you have any

further complaints, please address them to the royal family. The ancient text I was shown listed the steps of the ceremony and nothing more, so I did not know what would happen before I performed it.”

“You performed the ceremony without even knowing what it would do?!” Sylvester exclaimed. Florencia looked equally shocked.

“Yes,” I replied with a nod. “The text did not offer an explanation, but the royal family still decided that it was worth the risk. Any questions the other duchies might have should go to them.”

The royals had tasked me with carrying out the annoying request, so they could take care of the fallout. I didn’t expect them or the Sovereign temple to be able to give any satisfying answers, but that didn’t matter; there was no reason for Ehrenfest to go through all this trouble when it wasn’t our fault to begin with.

“In essence, the ceremony can be explained as simply as the ritual that Dunkelfelger performed during the Interduchy Tournament,” I said. “We used divine instruments to offer mana to the gods, and our observance of ancient practices produced the results you saw today.”

Sylvester started to look more convinced. He could probably remember Dunkelfelger’s demonstration.

“In truth,” I continued, “I’m more concerned about the Sovereign temple. They want to use these revived rituals to obtain a true Zent.”

“Do take care with the Sovereign temple,” Hartmut interjected. “Immanuel is not one to heed the words of others. I am certain that he will go to any length to obtain what he desires, and our common sense as nobles will not apply to him.” He spoke with a severe expression, having been on guard throughout the entire ceremony. His concerns had only increased after Immanuel predicted and attempted to block our secondary escape route.

He continued, “Immanuel seeks to control Lady Rozemyne, since she has the mana necessary to revive the ancient ceremonies that survive through the Sovereign temple’s records. Their ceremonies could indeed play an important role in the procurement of a true Zent, but such concerns fall to the royal family and the Sovereign temple, *not* an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest.”

Asking for my assistance might have been considered reasonable under more fortunate circumstances, but Ehrenfest

didn't have the resources to be fretting about such things. Ferdinand was now living in Ahrensbach, we were still dealing with the aftermath of the purge, and the duchy was suffering a lack of both mana and manpower.

Hartmut looked squarely at Sylvester. "There is a very real chance that Lady Rozemyne might be stolen from us—the royal family or the Sovereign temple need only find an excuse that the other duchies will accept. If we hope to prioritize her safety above all else, then we must consider refusing this request for her to help out in the library."

Most of the adults recoiled at the mere thought of opposing the royal family. But as they murmured their disapproval, Sylvester closed his eyes and contemplated the situation.

"I know that many of you think it would be too rude of us to refuse the royal family," he eventually said, "but I'm going to protest if necessary. I'll even bring up how they extorted us to take Ferdinand."

"I thank you," Hartmut replied.

"You were *phenomenal*, Lady Rozemyne!" Clarissa exclaimed the moment we sat down for lunch. She had watched the ceremony as a member of Ehrenfest and was positively enraptured. "Your every movement was so transcendently elegant! And your dazzling white robes—oh, how you stood out amid that sea of weary blue! All eyes were naturally drawn to you, and—"

"Clarissa. Calm down," Ottilie said. "That 'sea of weary blue' was Lady Rozemyne's guard knights. In fact, you could barely even see her when she was surrounded."

"Were your eyes not even open?!" Clarissa exclaimed, refusing to heed Ottilie's warning in the slightest. "Did you not see Lady Rozemyne's divine form? Did you not witness the divinity and compassion radiating from her expression? I am at a loss for words."

As am I. Did you seriously assign that much meaning to a simple expression?

"When I saw Hartmut take Lady Rozemyne's hand and guide her onto the stage, I felt Eifersuneid let loose his hair and spread his cape wide. Oh, but then Lady Rozemyne started speaking to the supreme gods, and my attention was drawn to her cute, captivating voice—a present from Kunstzeal, no less!"

Er... sorry, Clarissa. I can tell that you're complimenting me, but I don't have a clue what you're trying to say. Is Eifersuneid letting his hair loose a good thing? Or is the part about his cape what matters most?

With written text, I could observe the flow of each line and then extrapolate the significance from there. That wasn't an option when listening to someone speak; the words all came pouring out at once, and there was no time to analyze them when you were expected to give a prompt response. To make matters worse, sometimes a person would mention one of the gods, then start bringing up several more before you could even wrap your head around the first. It was all much too confusing.

Save me, Ottilie...

I turned to my likely savior, but she had already resumed eating—a sign that she had completely given up on calming down Clarissa. Meanwhile, Hartmut was adding fuel to the fire, peppering the conversation with small remarks about what he had seen from the shrine.

“Indeed, one can tell at a glance that Lady Rozemyne is a divine avatar of Mestionora,” he said, “and it seemed entirely as if the supreme gods were answering her call. How could anyone forget the cape of Darkness fluttering into the air? Oh, one could fill any number of books trying to capture the divinity of that moment when she recreated the night sky! Do you not agree that even Grammaratur would struggle to put into words the beauty of the scene?”

“Yes, truly!” Clarissa exulted. “The stars twinkled deep within the bosom of the God of Darkness, while the Goddess of Light...”

I don't understaaand... I'm just going to leave them to their own little world.

One thing was crystal clear to me, though: Hartmut and Clarissa really were perfect for each other. I left them to their excited chattering and turned to Lieseleita, who had also gone to the auditorium to watch the ceremony.

“So, what did you think?” I asked. “Ceremonies at the Royal Academy are always so fancy, aren't they?” I was hoping to secure her agreement as someone who had once been my fellow student, but she gave me a troubled smile instead.

“Lady Rozemyne, the word ‘fancy’ is less than ideal... I would suggest ‘wondrous’ or perhaps ‘mystical’ instead. It truly was a sight to behold.”

“Yes, mystical!” Clarissa exclaimed, her blue eyes sparkling as she butted into our conversation. “The mystical gods made their presence known! We could practically feel them among us! I would expect nothing less from you, Lady Rozemyne. You can converse even with the gods themselves!”

“That was *not* what we were referring to...” I said. “Clarissa, should you not save all this gushing about the ceremony for later, when you can more freely discuss it with Hartmut? For now, focus on your food. You haven’t taken so much as a moment to savor it.”

Today’s lunch was especially extravagant, serving as both a celebratory start to the Archduke Conference and an opportunity for the duchy’s nobles to socialize. Clarissa’s raving had gone from being amusing to an annoying buzz in my ears, which was why I’d indirectly suggested that she button it.

“Worry not—any meal is delicious as long as I can eat it while talking about you, Lady Rozemyne.”

“I see. Then should we ask the chefs to start preparing less appetizing dishes for you?”

“My apologies. I’ll eat quietly.”

There were audible sighs of relief as Clarissa finally stopped rambling. I couldn’t help but wonder how Dunkelfelger had managed to put up with her for so long.

It was the start of a new day. According to the reports I’d received, Ehrenfest had gotten plenty of very curious questions during the previous afternoon’s meetings, but they had all been avoided with the use of three template answers: “It was at the royal family’s request that she included those ancient customs,” “The pillar of light was identical in nature to the one that Dunkelfelger produced during the Interduchy Tournament,” and “Please ask the royal family for any further details.” We had also received more meal invitations than last year, but it wasn’t anything that we couldn’t manage, apparently.

“Hartmut, Clarissa, please perform your duties as scholars with the utmost diligence,” I said.

“Understood.”

I saw the adults off at third bell, then spent some time reading in my room. I would only be going to the library once everyone had reached their destinations and the halls were quiet.

“Lady Hannelore is going to be there,” I said, “so don’t forget to

bring the third volume of *The Story of Fernestine*.”

The guard knights held a meeting while Lieseleta and Otilie were preparing.

“Only archknights can enter the underground archive, so Leonore and I will accompany Lady Rozemyne,” Cornelius said. “Damuel, Angelica, stand guard outside the library while we are inside.”

“If anyone suspicious arrives, inform us at once,” Leonore added. “We will not be able to run or hide without first leaving the archive. Though I cannot even begin to imagine what manner of rampage Lady Rozemyne would unleash if the library were to be used as a battlefield.”

Damuel and Angelica nodded.

“I much prefer the sound of guarding the library to spending the day there,” Angelica happily declared, at which point an ordonnanz from Solange flew into the room. Hannelore had arrived.

“Let us go, then.”

And so, with my four guard knights and two attendants in tow, I made my way to the library.

“Here, milady.”

“Mana please, milady.”

Schwartz and Weiss had come to welcome me, so I stroked their foreheads and supplied them with mana. Lieseleta broke into a smile at the sight of the shumils, but Otilie blankly stared at them; no amount of forewarning could have prepared her for seeing the library’s magic tools greet me as their lady.

“Lady Rozemyne. Welcome,” Solange said. “Everyone is waiting in the office. There are so many people today that I must ask you to bring no more than three retainers with you.”

As it turned out, Hannelore wasn’t the only one who had arrived; the royal family was here too. Damuel and Angelica stepped outside the library to guard the door, while Lieseleta smiled and stepped away to prepare tea. That left me with Otilie, Cornelius, and Leonore.

I entered the office with my three retainers to find Anastasius, Eglantine, Hildebrand, and Hannelore. Also with them was a woman I didn’t recognize. Her hair was up and a very similar color to Hildebrand’s, while her eyes were redder than Hannelore’s and suggested a strong, cutthroat personality. She was probably in her

mid-twenties.

“So, Rozemyne,” Anastasius said, “yesterday’s ceremony took an unusual turn. We expected as much, but it produced even better results than we had anticipated.”

What does that even mean...?

I didn’t know what Anastasius was referring to. It seemed to be positive, though, so I decided not to give it any more thought. Instead, I signaled with my eyes for him to introduce me to the new woman.

“Aah, this is Lady Magdalena, Father’s third wife and Hildebrand’s mother. As someone born in Dunkelfelger, she is well versed in ancient language and will be contributing to today’s translations.”

At once, I knelt before her and performed the usual greeting. “I am Rozemyne, an archduke candidate of Ehrenfest. May I pray for a blessing in appreciation of this serendipitous meeting, ordained by the pure rivers flowing from Flutrane the Goddess of Water?”

“You may. Lady Rozemyne... I have heard much about you from the princes and am delighted that we can finally meet. I look forward to working with you during this Archduke Conference.”

It was time to move. We passed through the closed-stack archive and went down into the basement. Hortensia took the lead, since she was an archlibrarian, with Schwartz and Weiss hopping along after her. Even now, status was important. I watched as the royals spoke with their retainers who had been waiting outside, then descended.

“I heard about this place, but I’m still surprised that it exists below the library...” Cornelius said with a noticeably stern expression. He then muttered that Leonore had been correct in saying that we would have nowhere to run if we were attacked.

Hortensia, Hannelore, and I slotted our keys into the metallic-looking wall, which was then covered in complex patterns as lines of mana darted along its surface. Then, with a creaking sound, it split into three rotating sections. Seeing the underground archive appear behind the transparent wall always made my heart race.

Schwartz entered, while Weiss waited outside—as was normally the case. Retainers weren’t allowed any farther, and everyone else surpassed me in status, so I needed to enter next to prove that it was safe. I took some paper and ink, then passed through the transparent wall.

“Milady. Not enough prayer,” Schwartz said, as usual.

“I’ll work on that,” I replied while placing ink and paper on the table.

“Hannelore. Not enough elements. Not enough prayer.”

Hannelore was likewise used to Schwartz’s remark. She ignored it and instead prepared some writing utensils.

“Oh, Prince Hildebrand?”

After turning to see who was coming next, I’d seen Hildebrand reach for the transparent wall with a tense look on his face. He had been knocked back during his previous attempt, but now he passed through without incident.

“Hildebrand. Not enough elements. Not enough prayer.”

“I got in...” Hildebrand muttered. He hadn’t reacted to Schwartz in the slightest; instead, he was merely staring at his hands, his expression a mixture of surprise and joy. After a moment, he turned to Magdalena, who was entering after him, and cried, “I got in, Mother!”

“Well done, Hildebrand. Your hard work has paid off.”

“Magdalena. Not enough elements. Not enough prayer.”

As it turned out, Hildebrand had told the king that he wanted to obtain more mana so that he could help out as much as possible, which had led to him being taught the royal family’s mana compression method. His mother, Magdalena, had taught him a Dunkelfelger mana compression method as well.

“I learned some ancient letters too,” he said, “since I want to be able to help transcribe the documents.”

Of course, there were other Sovereign nobles who could read the old language, but they weren’t able to enter the archive. Hildebrand would simply be transcribing the documents as they were, then his transcriptions would be translated at a later date.

Magdalena laughed. “King Trauerqual asked me to enter as well, so I took part in my first refresher lesson of ancient language in quite some time.”

Next, Eglantine and Anastasius entered.

“Eglantine. Not enough prayer.”

“Anastasius. Not enough prayer.”

“Hmm. Its message changed,” Anastasius said. “Repeating the divine protections ritual completed my elements after all. Sigiswald should receive a new evaluation as well.”

The royal family had also repeated the ritual—and, in the

process, both Anastasius and Eglantine had apparently become omni-elemental.

“Is that really true, Prince Anastasius?” I asked. “You have every element now?”

“Indeed. You taught us that praying while performing Mana Replenishment would produce such results, did you not? Because I prayed to the gods without fail when supplying mana over the winter, I was granted four new divine protections.”

Meanwhile, Eglantine had gained two. They would be repeating the ceremony again next year.

“Oh my. You became omni-elemental as well, Lady Eglantine?” Hannelore asked. “Does that mean I might also be able to obtain more divine protections when I graduate?”

Eglantine placed a hand on her cheek and slowly shook her head. “I was omni-elemental to begin with.”

“Obtaining more divine protections and elements is important, but we stand to gain far more by transcribing and translating the documents here,” Anastasius continued. “Now, let us hurry and get to work. Eglantine and I have plans this afternoon, so time is of the essence.”

At his instruction, we began our work transcribing and translating the white slates. Anastasius, Eglantine, and Hildebrand transcribed them word for word while Magdalena, Hannelore, and I worked on translating them. The former group had only recently begun their studies, so it would have taken them much too long to attempt anything more.

We worked in silence, each taking breaks as we needed them, and eventually reached fourth bell.

“That will be all from us,” Anastasius announced. “I understand that working for so long can be tiresome, but I must ask that you all continue through the afternoon.” He then took his leave, along with Eglantine and their retainers.

Hannelore and I were going to eat our lunches outside the underground archive, in a specially prepared rest area. We were still underage, so we didn’t want any nobles to see us wandering around during the Archduke Conference. The royal family also wanted to keep it a secret that they were employing the services of mere students, as such news certainly wouldn’t benefit their reputation.

Magdalena and Hildebrand had originally intended to return to

their villas, but they ultimately decided to eat at the archive as well. Their attendants were preparing their meals.

Magdalena picked up her cutlery. “It is a fair distance to the villa, and it would not be respectable for me, the third wife, to be seen wandering the Royal Academy during the Archduke Conference. Do allow me to join you.” It seemed that she had actively been avoiding the public eye in an attempt to prop up the first wife. If she drew more attention to herself, people would inevitably start pushing for her to be made the first wife instead—especially as she was from Dunkelfelger.

The Zent’s first wife is from... Gilessenmeyer, I think? It’s a middle duchy rather than a greater one, and it sits lower on the rankings at fourth. Of course people would prefer Magdalena.

Magdalena had spent years avoiding the Archduke Conference, so anyone who saw her now would assume that she was working in the shadows or leaking information to her home duchy. One could never tell when such rumors might surface.

“At this time of year, a picnic outside would be delightful,” Magdalena remarked. “But alas, there is no more troublesome foe than the shapeless being that is society. Lady Rozemyne, Lady Hannelore, do take care.”

I nodded and said, “I thank you ever so much for your warning.”

“Incidentally, Lady Rozemyne... I have been wanting to ask you about yesterday’s ceremony. I could not go to the auditorium myself, so I missed a seemingly wondrous event.”

Hildebrand and Hannelore both nodded in agreement, their eyes sparkling with interest. They were underage, so they hadn’t been able to attend either.

“I wanted to see it too,” Hildebrand said. “Father described the sight of the radiant light piercing the night sky as divinity itself.”

Hannelore giggled. “The scene was so beautiful that my brother returned with an overwhelming desire to paint it. I cannot wait to see what he produces. His overenthusiasm earned him a scolding from Mother, though—she said that he should wait until the conference has finished before obsessing over his art.”

“And, of course,” Magdalena continued, “a faint magic circle arose for a few moments on the stage where Prince Sigiswald and Lady Adolphine received your blessing. Some have even begun to say that the prince has been acknowledged by the gods as the next

Zent.”

“A magic circle arose on the stage?” I repeated, freezing in place with my fork halfway to my mouth. The chunk of meat that I had been about to eat dropped back onto my plate, but I was so taken aback by this news that I didn’t even notice.

Hannelore’s eyes widened. “Did you not see the circle, Lady Rozemyne? Everyone from our duchy has been talking about it. You were performing the ceremony from the shrine, were you not?”

I paused, taking a moment to reflect on everything that had occurred. “I was facing upward—as is customary when praying—so I did not see the stage at all.”

“And nobody from Ehrenfest even mentioned it?” Magdalena asked, looking surprised. I certainly hadn’t heard any such news yesterday in the dormitory.

“Erm, it was only yesterday morning that the Sovereign temple told me to perform the ritual in the traditional style,” I said.

“Ehrenfest knew nothing about it before it actually happened, so we spent most of our lunchtime discussing what I had done and how to answer the inevitable questions from nobles of other duchies. Furthermore, Clarissa and Hartmut...”

“We can extrapolate the rest,” Hannelore said. “They speak only of you, correct?”

Indeed, they were always fixated on my actions, and yesterday had been no exception. Their praise had become like a tiresome refrain, rearing its head again and again. Leberecht had ended up scolding them for it before they could even reach dinnertime.

“We received so many requests in the afternoon that, come dinnertime, everyone spoke only of how to deal with them. The ceremony itself received not even a mention. This is my first time hearing that a magic circle arose.”

It really feels like I’m the last person to find out, even though I was the one performing the ceremony.

If that truly had been the magic circle for selecting Zent candidates, then I could see why the Sovereign temple was so desperate to revive the ancient customs. Anastasius’s remark about the results having been even better than expected also made a lot more sense.

“I shall bring it up at dinner,” I said. “Ignorance about this subject will only bring me harm moving forward.”

After lunch, I was back to work, translating and modernizing

line after line of the ancient slates. It really was fun being able to read entirely new texts.

“Lady Rozemyne!” Magdalena called, roughly shaking me by the shoulders. I looked up at her with a start, at which point she continued, “Your retainers have received an ordonnanz. Let us leave the archive.”

We did just that and reunited with Cornelius. He thanked Magdalena, then conveyed what the correspondence from Damuel had said:

“It seems that Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach has come to the library.”

“She became a Zent candidate after triggering the magic circle during her coming-of-age ceremony,” Leonore added. “It could be that she came here to obtain the knowledge necessary to take the throne.”

Magdalena blinked. “But few even know that the archive exists.”

“That may not be true,” I said. “Lord Ferdinand viewed it not as a secret to be kept but as somewhere that any archduke candidate could enter, as long as they met the right conditions. If we assume that all manner of royals and archduke candidates once frequented the archive, then it would make perfect sense for others to know about it.”

“Yes, that might be the case...” Magdalena muttered, though she didn’t seem entirely convinced. Her lips then curved into a smile as though she had come to a realization of some kind. “I have long wanted to speak with this Lady Detlinde, who claims to be a Zent candidate. Leave this situation to me, Lady Rozemyne. You, Hildebrand, and Lady Hannelore may continue your work.”

Zent Candidates

I was about to go back into the archive, resolved to leave everything in Magdalena's capable hands, when Hannelore timidly called out, "E-Erm, Lady Magdalena..."

"Yes, Lady Hannelore?"

"Rather than continuing to work in the archive, perhaps we should... hide, or something of the like, so that we do not cross paths with Lady Detlinde. Should we not keep our working here a secret?"

Magdalena paused in thought. "It would be safest for you to remain here, as we do not know how many guards Lady Detlinde has brought or what she intends to do... but you are largely correct."

If we stayed put, then it wouldn't matter how many guards were accompanying Detlinde; none of them would be able to enter the archive with her. That made it the safest place for us, but avoiding detection entirely was still the best outcome.

"An encounter on the stairs would prove most dangerous of all..." Leonore said. We were all at a loss for words, but the sudden appearance of an ordonnanz brought us back to our senses. It landed on Magdalena's wrist, then started to deliver a message from Solange. She was speaking in a hushed voice, as if concerned about who might overhear her.

"This is Solange. Lady Detlinde is coming to my office to receive her library registration. If you wish to keep the young ones out of sight, hide them at the back of the closed-stack archive. I will assist you in leaving through another exit later."

Solange had known that we were eating lunch here in the underground archive, so she had gone to the trouble of contacting us. If she could buy us some time and help us to escape, she would be doing us a tremendous favor.

And here I thought I would get to hang out in the archive all day. Curse you, Lady Detlinde.

"If you wish to avoid her as well, Lady Magdalena, then we

could all hide together,” I suggested.

She shook her head. “No, it would be strange for the archive to be open without anyone inside. Furthermore, I must find out who informed Lady Detlinde of this archive and when. She should not know of a place that not even the surviving royal family was aware of. We can also assume that it was a recent discovery for her; otherwise, she would have registered while she was a student.”

True... If she had known about the archive before, then why wouldn't she have joined the library?

“Even after Professor Solange guides you outside,” Magdalena continued, “take care not to approach the central building. Those who have finished their lunch might still be in the halls. I will send an ordonnanz once Lady Detlinde leaves the library.”

I nodded, gave her my translations, then gathered my things together in preparation to leave. In the meantime, Cornelius sent ordonnanzes to my attendants, warning them not to return to the library for the time being.

“I alone shall deal with Lady Detlinde,” Magdalena announced with a smile. “Hildebrand, do not slow the others down.” She entrusted him to his guard knights, then hurried us all out of the room.

We rushed upstairs. The door leading into the closed-stack archive had been left unlocked for our attendants, so we didn't face any issues on that front.

Cornelius was standing by the entrance to the reading room and scanning the archive for any blind spots. “Prince Hildebrand, please hide over there, behind the farthest bookshelves. Those of Dunkelfelger, do the same. Lady Rozemyne, come to this bookshelf over here—and take care not to step out from behind it.”

The bookshelves in the closed-stack archive, where so many valuable documents were kept, all had solid back panels, meaning they were perfect to hide behind. Hildebrand and Hannelore were at the very back of the room, since they had so many retainers, while my retinue and I were waiting behind a bookshelf closer to the entrance.

“Are they not done yet...?”

No matter how long we waited, Detlinde never appeared. I was grateful that Solange was buying us time, but standing completely still was starting to hurt.

“The door is unlocked so that attendants can pass through.

Remain quiet, as they could enter at any moment.”

I wanna read the books heere...

There were so many new titles before my very eyes, and not being able to delve into them was agonizing.

Oh, what if I promise to stay quiet? Can I read then? No? Figures. I knew that would be the answer, but it was worth a shot.

I decided to hold my tongue, well aware that my request would only annoy my retainers—and that was when the door suddenly clicked open. Bright light streamed into the closed-stack archive.

“Oh my. And that letter was your reason for coming here?” Solange asked, her soft voice filling the room. She was purposefully making sure we knew why Detlinde was visiting.

“Indeed. I do not know who sent it, but they said that they sincerely wanted me to become the next Zent and that this library contained information crucial to becoming the country’s next ruler. It was surely a gift from the gods.”

Hold on a second... You came all the way here simply because an anonymous letter told you to...? Isn't that ridiculously thoughtless for an archduke candidate?!

I knew that specifically because I’d received so many criticisms for my own thoughtless actions. Had I done what Detlinde was doing right now, Ferdinand would have given me a taste of thunder for sure. I was surprised that she had received the letter to begin with, considering that all such correspondence was supposed to go through one’s attendants.

This is unthinkable behavior for an archduke candidate, but I'm more surprised that she's actually found what she was seeking.

Ferdinand had said that Detlinde failed to activate the magic circle because she didn’t have enough mana—but if she really was serious about becoming the next Zent, she had come to the right place.

“The letter mentioned that the Royal Academy’s library opens during the Archduke Conference, so here I am,” Detlinde said. “Meetings and tea parties continue to fill my schedule as we speak; had I not seized this opportunity to come, who knows how long I might have had to wait?”

It was rare for someone to be so busy from the very beginning of the Archduke Conference. For the first few days, the archducal couples of each duchy would all gather together for meetings, and only then were invitations given and plans made. One’s schedule

would often start quite empty and then gradually become more packed over time.

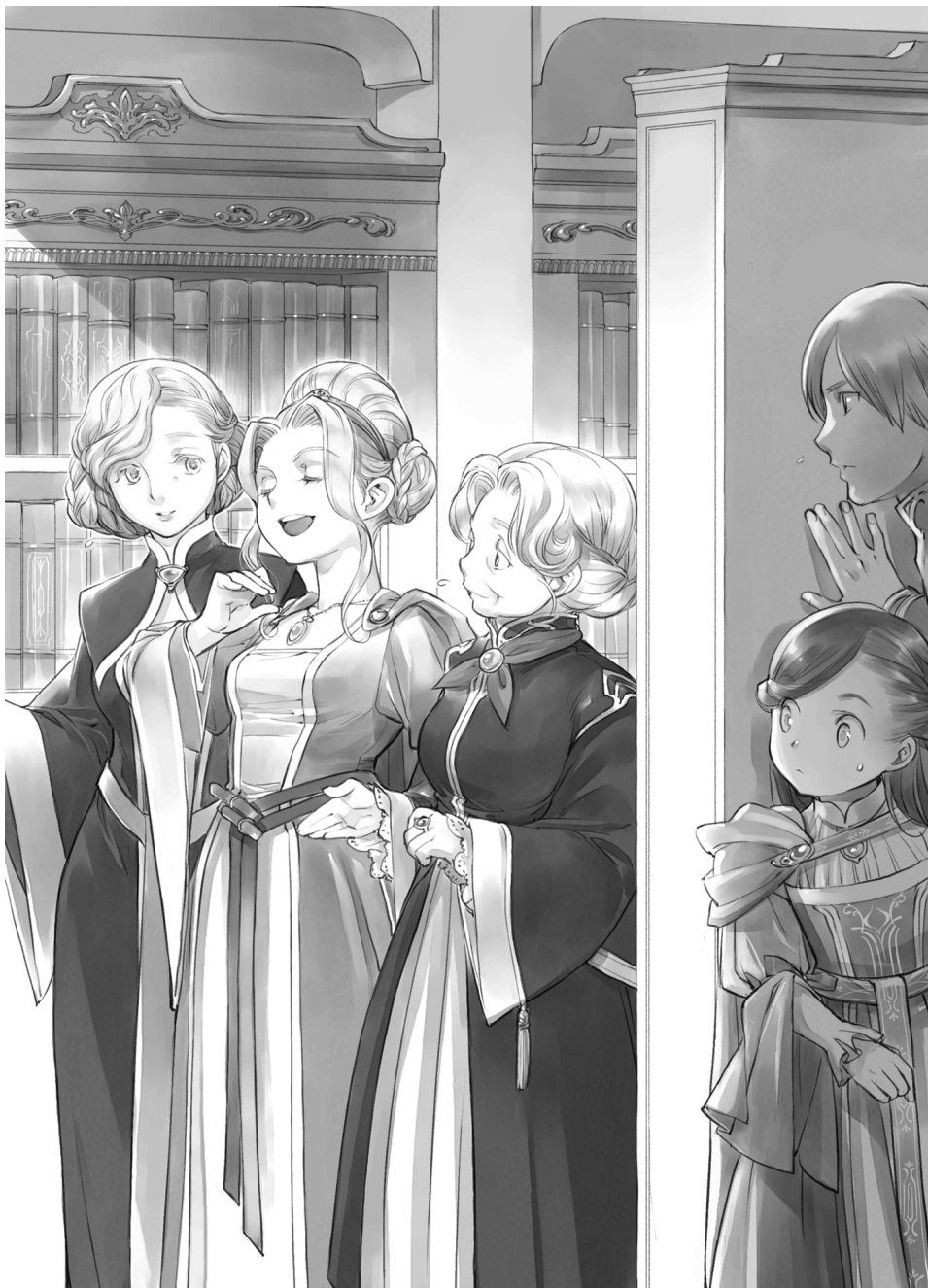
Back when Ehrenfest had sat near the bottom of the rankings, our nobles had received so few invitations that many of them had considered going home early. That wasn't the case anymore, though; Sylvester had informed me that everyone's schedules were completely full.

In other words, he won't be able to leave and then heroically appear elsewhere like he did when I was an apprentice blue shrine maiden.

Detlinde continued, "Prince Sigiswald triggered the magic circle during his Starbind Ceremony. It stands to reason, then, that the royal family will also come to this underground archive during the conference. I simply cannot allow the prince to get ahead of me—not when I was recognized as a Zent candidate first."

Hortensia gave a conflicted smile and said in a chastising voice, "Such phrasing may be considered disrespectful to the royal family."

In response, Detlinde giggled. "A family without the Grutrissheit can hardly be considered genuine royalty. I was chosen by the gods—and, by their will, I shall become a *true* Zent." I wasn't at all sure where her confidence was coming from, but her high-pitched laughter echoed throughout the closed-stack archive.



“But you are the next Aub Ahrensbach, are you not?”

“For now, but I will obtain the Grutrisheit before I become aub.”

Detlinde’s retainers hadn’t said a word this entire time. I wasn’t sure why—maybe they believed her, or maybe correcting her was such a futile effort that they were pretending not to hear her—but it was a very bad move. At this rate, she was going to be imprisoned for treason, and Ferdinand alongside her.

Hortensia cleared her throat, at last putting a stop to the piercing laughter. “Lady Detlinde, if you would allow me to ask a question...” Then, in a deliberately clear voice, she continued, “Are Schlaftraum’s flowers blossoming as beautifully as ever this year?”

“Schlaftraum’s flowers?”

“Oh, are you not familiar with them? They can only be obtained in Ahrensbach, and my husband is rather fond of them. Do ask Lady Georgine about them when you next get the chance.”

With that, Hortensia led Detlinde and her retainers downstairs, and they disappeared from sight.

What are Schlaftraum’s flowers? Lady Detlinde doesn’t know about them, but Lady Georgine does? Hortensia’s married to Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, right?

Schlaftraum was the God of Dreams, which was probably a hint. I didn’t doubt that it was some kind of secret code that nobles used when they wanted to be discreet, or appear inconspicuous, or test the waters to see how much the other person knew.

Maybe I should ask Ferdinand. That might not be a smart move, though...

It seemed unwise to write to him immediately after being told to minimize contact with him, but this weight seemed too heavy for me to bear alone. Two very important people had suddenly been mentioned: Georgine, who was targeting Ehrenfest, and Raublut, who had sent Ferdinand to Ahrensbach over suspicions of treason. Even I could tell that this was a serious and potentially dangerous problem.

Since this has something to do with Georgine, I’ll need to discuss it with Sylvester as well—but that goes without saying.

As for Raublut, I wasn’t sure whether Sylvester even knew about him. I’d only interacted with the man when I was summoned

to the Royal Academy about the bible, and when he came to the library and revealed that Ferdinand was a seed of Adalgisa.

Hopefully I can explain today's events while keeping all the Adalgisa stuff a secret.

I was pulled from my thoughts by a sudden noise as Solange closed the door to the basement. She locked it, then turned around and said, "Everyone, are you there?"

"Yes, Professor Solange."

"There is another exit over here."

She took us outside through an emergency exit. Going from the dim lighting of the closed-stack archive to the bright outdoors made my eyes sting.

"This is the back side of the library. It happens to be opposite the central building so, as long as you do not ride your highbeasts, nobody should see you."

So this was the library's garden? I could see tables and chairs in place, but the overgrown grass had started to swallow them. I could guess that this had once served as somewhere for the librarians to rest and have tea, way back when the library wasn't severely understaffed.

"Perhaps you could wander about for a bit while you wait for Lady Detlinde to leave," Solange suggested. "Spending an entire day underground would surely be bad for your health. In any case, I cannot stay here with you; I must lock the archive doors and return to my office."

Solange then returned to the library. We had managed to avoid Detlinde, but it was too much to expect me to walk around until she left.

If only I had taken out a book...

But, well... no use crying over spilled milk. I stared off into the distance, in a daze, while Hannelore looked around the garden, evidently troubled.

"Weather this nice makes me wish we could have a picnic," she said, "but we left our tea and sweets in the underground archive. How shall we pass the time?"

Hildebrand's head attendant, Arthur, nervously examined our surroundings. "Lady Hannelore, while a picnic does indeed sound nice, we must consider the worst-case scenario and move somewhere more hidden. If we stay where we are now, we might be visible through the reading room's windows."

"I agree," Leonore added. "I do not believe that anyone would use the reading room's carrels during the Archduke Conference, but the fact remains that we are completely exposed. Shall we head over there? Nobody should see us in the forest."

She was pointing to the southern end of the garden, at a dense gathering of trees. Sunlight filtered through their branches, painting the forest floor with a complex pattern of shadows. It certainly looked more comfortable than staying out in the open.

"Leonore is correct," Otilie said. "Lady Rozemyne, it would be best for you to travel there in your one-person highbeast. You risk falling ill under the intensity of this sunlight."

"I think you're underestimating how much healthier I am now..." I murmured, my lips pursed. The second jureve had done wonders for me. It was possible that Otilie just wasn't aware of my improvement; she hadn't accompanied me to the Royal Academy, and I spent most of my time in Ehrenfest at the temple.

"Lady Rozemyne, I am aware that your health is gradually improving, but we have nothing to gain from taking unnecessary risks. If you fall ill, then you will need to wait quite some time before you can next visit the archive."

That's true, but don't say it in front of Prince Hildebrand and Lady Hannelore!

I glanced in their direction, holding back a shriek. As expected, they were still traumatized from seeing me collapse; they and their retainers urged me toward the trees, the blood gone from their faces.

"Rozemyne, let us go," Hildebrand said. "You may use your highbeast. If you take ill while helping us, then the royal family will be at quite a loss..."

Hannelore nodded. "Prince Hildebrand is correct. As I recall, Dunkelfelger's dormitory is directly south of here. We might be able to see it after moving through the forest for a bit."

I couldn't protest any further when even Hildebrand was pushing for me to use my highbeast. I produced a small, one-person Pandabus, then headed to the forest with the others. It was pretty vexing that I was the only one not on my feet.

This isn't fair. I could definitely keep up with Prince Hildebrand.

Cornelius sent off an ordonnanz, and we reunited with Damuel and Angelica just as we reached the forest. I wasn't all too pleased that everyone's overprotectiveness had pressured me into using my

highbeast, but our stroll among the trees gave me some much-needed respite; the air here must have been filled with negative ions.

“It really is strange seeing the Royal Academy not covered in snow,” I said, “but this is quite a pleasant forest.”

“Indeed,” Hannelore agreed. “This is my first time noticing its beauty. The greenery and colorful flowers provide such a wonderful contrast to the ivory buildings.” Like me, she had only ever seen the Royal Academy during the winter, and she was equally impressed by its springtime beauty.

Once we had all praised our surroundings, Hannelore began to tell me her thoughts about *The Story of Fernestine* so far. She hadn’t wanted to discuss it while we were with Magdalena.

“I am so, so very curious about what happens next,” she said, trembling with anticipation. “I cannot bear it. If poor Fernestine does not get a happy ending after all she has been through, then I do not know what Dunkel—um, what *I* will do...”

The second volume had ended on such a cruel note: Fernestine received the prince’s proposal, only for the king to oppose it. Her stepmother’s schemes then saw her engaged to another man, which sent her plummeting into a bottomless pit of despair.

“Hannelore, there is no need to grieve,” Hildebrand said rather firmly. “The prince *will* come to save Fernestine. Their love for one another is so pure; there is no world in which he gives up on her.” He was clearly up to date with the series as well.

“Is that true, Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked.

They were both watching me with such hopeful eyes that I couldn’t help but smile. “I see no reason to spoil the story when you can just read it for yourselves. I brought the third volume with me to the Royal Academy.”

“Oh my!” Hannelore exclaimed. “Did you? I cannot wait. And, um...” She tensed up a little. “This really *is* the final volume, I trust?”

I nodded, and only then did she finally smile in relief.

“What’s that...?” Angelica wondered aloud; she had climbed a tree to get a better look at our surroundings. “I see a white building.” We couldn’t even glimpse it ourselves, but she mentioned that it wasn’t particularly large.

“Could it be Dunkelfelger’s dormitory?” I asked.

"I don't think so. Their dormitory is larger and farther away. This building is so small and overgrown that you wouldn't see it from above."

Nobody else seemed to know what Angelica had spotted; the Royal Academy's dormitories always reached above the treetops. Each one had a basement for the workers and storage, a first floor for the dining hall and common room, a second floor for the boys' rooms, a third floor for the girls' rooms, and a fourth floor that functioned more as an attic for extra storage. By no means could they be described as "small."

"Angelica," I said, "please investigate, if you would. There might be an open area around the building where we can rest."

At once, she used physical enhancement magic on herself and nimbly leapt from one branch to another, making her way over to the building. Hannelore gave similar instructions to one of her guards, who darted off as well.

"The door was locked and did not open," Angelica reported. "It was very filthy and presumably hasn't been used for at least a decade."

Hannelore's guard nodded in agreement. "Its existence came as a surprise to us all, so it seems an ideal place for us to rest while staying out of sight."

So, at the advice of our reconnaissance squad, we headed to the curious building among the trees. Its disheveled appearance and the overgrown grass around it were enough to prove that nobody had come here in a very long time.

"Ivory buildings do not degrade like this when someone is supplying them with mana. It really must be abandoned."

"And it certainly is small," Hildebrand added. "Is it a forester's shed, perhaps?"

Arthur shook his head. "Those are much smaller." This building was small compared to dormitories and castles, but it was still much larger than a forester's shed or a gazebo. It also didn't have any windows, which meant we couldn't see inside.

The building was strange, but the statues on either side of the door reminded me of the entrance to the temple from the lower city's side. "Could this be a shrine?" I ventured. "I remember hearing that my grandfather once destroyed one on the outskirts of the Royal Academy during a game of treasure-stealing ditter."

Professor Solange also mentioned that a troublesome student once played pranks at the Academy's shrines to the gods—before his sudden disappearance, that is.”

I climbed out of Lessy and approached the building. It wouldn't do to leave a shrine dedicated to the gods in such a terrible state.

“Lady Rozemyne?”

“For now, I will clean it. We cannot sit here and rest while it remains so filthy.”

It only made sense that I should take care of this; Hildebrand and Hannelore had come all the way here on foot and no doubt needed to rest, whereas I had traveled in the comfort of my Pandabus. I reached into the leather pouch on my hip and took out a sheet of fey paper with a magic circle on it.

“What is that?”

“A product of Clarissa's research,” I said. “This magic circle makes it much easier to cast spells over a larger area.”

I created my schtappe and poured mana into the circle. The paper rose into the air and started to shine, at which point I chanted, “*Waschen*.” In an instant, the entire building was engulfed in a massive ball of water. Then, the liquid vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving behind a squeaky-clean ivory shrine.

“And there we have it,” I announced.

“Th-This is the first time I've ever seen a waschen clean an entire building at once,” Hannelore stammered.

After seeing Ferdinand clean the entire lower city after the *entwickeln*, I'd assumed that it was common practice to use large-scale *waschens*. Apparently not. Everyone was looking at me as though they'd just witnessed a miracle.

“Of course, I would not have been able to manage such a feat without the magic circle. It is all thanks to Clarissa, praised be her name. Ohoho...”

I was trying to laugh it off when something occurred to me—maybe Ferdinand was to blame for my lack of noble common sense.

“In any case, let us rest,” I said, inviting the others to sit down on the steps by the door. “Prince Hildebrand, Lady Hannelore, would you care to join me? You must be tired.”

Hildebrand raced over with a smile. “I shall accept your invitation, but our journey here did not tire me in the slightest. Mother has been training me to the Dunkelfelger standard, so I'm no less fit than any other child my age.”

Sure, Hildebrand was a member of the royal family, but he still had Dunkelfelger blood running through his veins. Hannelore didn't seem tired either; in fact, she was already considering whether to send an attendant to her dormitory to prepare tea for us.

Traveling in my highbeast was the right move after all. I wouldn't have been able to keep up with these two for long.

"Our dormitory is relatively close," Hannelore remarked. "Would anyone care for some tea?"

Hildebrand's retainers all shook their heads. "Be at ease," one of them said. "We do not wish to make ourselves known, and your attendants would struggle to prepare tea by highbeast."

"In that case, I will rest as well."

"Come sit with us," I said. "We can discuss *The Story of Fernestine* while waiting for Lady Magdalena to contact us."

As I moved my hand to indicate her seat, it brushed against the locked door behind me. The next thing I knew, I was being sucked into the shrine.

"Bwuh?!"

In the blink of an eye, my surroundings changed from the forest to the inside of an unfamiliar room. It was about twenty square meters in size and contained statues of thirteen gods, the centermost of which depicted a heroic-looking man wielding a spear and a translucent blue slate. This had to be a shrine dedicated to Leidenschaft the God of Fire.

I'd expected the inside of the building to be extremely dark on account of there not being any windows, but the blue slate provided more than enough light.

"This is my first time seeing a shrine like this..." I murmured to myself.

The shrines at the temple and the Royal Academy had statues for the supreme gods and the Eternal Five, but this was the first one I'd seen that was entirely dedicated to Fire. I realized now that the other twelve statues were of Leidenschaft's subordinates.

"Wowee... I'm going to hit a massive growth spurt after this," I said, then raised my hands in prayer. "O Leidenschaft the God of Fire, O Erwachlehen the God of Guidance, O Anwachs the God of Growth..."

Please let me grow to be a normal size!

As I finished praying, my mana sparked and got sucked into the blue slate that Leidenschaft was holding. The slate flashed, then

some text appeared on it.

Let's check this out... "Your prayers have reached me, and your worth has been acknowledged. I, Leidenschaft, shall now grant you a word necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora. This—"

The rest of the text—the mystical word included—was hidden behind the statue's fingers. "O mighty Leidenschaft, I cannot read your message from here!" I grumbled, and pulled the slate from his hands.

"This word alone, however, will not suffice; a Zent candidate must obtain the words of the other gods as well."

As soon as I read the last part of the message, the blue slate was absorbed into my chest and fused with the schtappe inside of me. I could sense that it was a combination of a Divine Will and all the mana I had offered through prayer thus far. At the same time, Leidenschaft's word arose in my mind, much like when I had learned the names of the God of Darkness and the Goddess of Light.

"Kraeftark."

"That sounds wonderful, thank you," Hannelore said with a smile as she sat down.

I gazed around, confused. No sooner had the word passed my lips than I had found myself outside the shrine again, with my hand still touching the door. Leidenschaft had evidently summoned me, and not a moment had passed in my absence.

"Lady Rozemyne, is something wrong?" Hannelore asked.

"Oh, no. Nothing at all," I replied, returning her smile.

Everyone was acting the same way as before, which meant that nobody had even noticed my disappearance. Leidenschaft's word was still engraved in my mind, though.

He said it was necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora, right? Aaaaaah... I really wanna read it...

The thought of a new book was alluring enough, but this one belonged to the Goddess of Wisdom herself! I could sense that Hildebrand and Hannelore were discussing something, but I was too distracted to pay them any mind.

I wonder what a book owned by a goddess is like... I can't wait to find out. I... Wait, hold on. Isn't "the Book of Mestionora" another name for the Grutrisseheit? That means I'm forbidden from reading it, right?

As my dreams crumbled into tiny little pieces, I started to reflect on my actions with a much clearer head. Should I have

attempted to contact my knights before reading the slate? Should I have approached it in the first place?

This reminds me of that strange experience we had at The Goddesses' Bath on the Night of Flutrane...

Back then, magical interference had made us forget to contact our allies, and a barrier had prevented the men from reaching us. Had something similar happened while I was in the shrine?

Okay. Let's calm down and think about this rationally.

If the Book of Mestionora really was the Grutrissheit, then it would be seriously dangerous for me to acquire it; I definitely didn't want to become the next Zent. The best way to avoid getting wrapped up in a huge disaster would be to remain completely silent.

Oh, who was I kidding? I wasn't about to miss an opportunity to read a book belonging to *a goddess*. I wanted to get my hands on it so bad. So, so bad.

Not to mention, the royal family is searching for the Grutrissheit, right? And they'd appreciate any hints as to its whereabouts.

They were so desperate to learn the requirements to become a true Zent that they were translating documents in an archive they hadn't even known about until recently. My experience in the shrine would be tremendously valuable to them.

But would they even be able to repeat it...?

My theory was that whenever a ritual performed at the Royal Academy created a pillar of light, at least a portion of it went to these shrines and contributed to the translucent tablets within. In other words, to receive the words of the gods, one would need to perform countless blessings and dedicate plenty of mana. Would the royal family be able to manage that when they were barely able to keep the country from falling apart?

In fact... what would happen if the royal family *couldn't* manage it? As someone who was used to delegating tasks that were beyond me to other people, my first instinct would be to dump the work on somebody else. Their only desire was for *someone* to obtain the Grutrissheit, so it seemed like the perfect solution.

The only issue was that, if the royal family *did* decide to entrust this duty to somebody else, it would definitely be me.

Sooo... what would the royal family do if they tasked me with getting the Grutrissheit and then I actually did...?

In an ideal world, I would just read it myself, then hand it

over... but what if things weren't so simple? The king had ordered Ferdinand to move to Ahrensbach for being a threat to Yurgenschmidt; if people started viewing me as similarly dangerous, then it was likely that I would receive some kind of royal decree as well.

In the worst-case scenario, they might even execute me.

After all, it was a dispute over the Grutrissheit that had started the civil war. The situation with Ferdinand had already demonstrated what would happen if anyone but the royal family obtained it—and, as I reflected on that, his voice came unbidden to my mind.

“Do you wish to rule, Rozemyne?”

That had been his question to me when the bible showed me the path to become the Zent. My feelings hadn't changed since then: I just wanted to read books. I didn't want to be a queen, nor did I want to be the reason for another war. It was in the royal family's best interests for me to share this information. But it was in *my* best interests to keep it to myself.

I wanted to consult someone about this, but it was much too serious; there wasn't a single person I could tell. I gazed up at the sky as I pondered my options... and saw several beams of blue light shoot from the roof of the shrine.

“What are those blue lights...?” I asked, pointing.

Hildebrand followed my finger with his eyes and squinted.

“What blue lights?”

Hannelore was squinting too; it seemed that neither one of them could see the lights, even though they stuck out like a sore thumb. Even their retainers were cocking their heads at me.

I blinked a few times and then shook my head. “Oh, my mistake. Perhaps it was just the sunlight.” If the others genuinely couldn't see the lights, then my best option was to drop it.

“It certainly is bright,” Hannelore said, still squinting up at the sky. The lights were clearly there, but she couldn't see them at all.

I wonder where they lead...

All of a sudden, an ordonnanz appeared. It landed on Arthur's arm, then said thrice in Magdalena's voice that we could return to the archive.

The Locations of the Shrines

“Was going outside a nice change of pace?” Magdalena asked.

Upon our return, our attendants had immediately prepared some tea for us. I was parched from our time in the sun, so it really hit the spot.

“Yes, Mother,” Hildebrand replied. “Professor Solange helped us to escape through a door in the closed-stack archive. It led us to a garden, but the sun was too strong for Rozemyne, so we ventured into the forest. We found a shrine hidden among the trees and ended up resting there—though the door was locked, so we could not go inside...”

Magdalena listened with a motherly expression. “If you were unable to enter, then how did you know it was a shrine?” she asked, prompting him to continue.

“Rozemyne said that its entrance resembled the one to Ehrenfest’s temple.”

“Ceremonies once held a surprising amount of significance here at the Royal Academy. The shrine you found was surely important as well.”

I resisted the urge to nod like crazy and instead offered a more innocuous response: “It has since been repaired, but my grandfather once broke a shrine during a game of treasure-stealing ditter. He said that it was near the edge of the Royal Academy’s grounds, though, so it must not have been the one we came across today. I doubt that we reached the outskirts after coming out of the library and taking a brief stroll through the nearby forest.”

The central, scholar, and attendant buildings—as well as the library—were all at the center of the Royal Academy. The “edge” was surely closer to where the dormitories were located. I was implying that there were other shrines out there, but would the others notice?

Hannelore seemed to pick up what I was putting down. “It would seem that there are other shrines or places of worship around the Royal Academy’s grounds. Does the royal family have a map of

the Academy, perhaps? Or keys to the shrines...?”

“In the past, the dormitories each maintained their own maps for ditter,” Magdalena said, “but the royal family has never had a map that marks the locations of any shrines—not to my knowledge, at least. I shall ask Solange and the librarians of the royal library.”

That reminded me—Ferdinand’s ditter instruction manuals included a simple map of the Royal Academy. Perhaps it would be a good idea to look around the dorm when we returned.

“Lady Magdalena, what did you discuss with Lady Detlinde?” I asked.

“Allow me to say this: she is both very extraordinary *and* very bold to call herself a Zent candidate.” She smiled. “Now, let us resume our work. We do not have much more time.”

I got the message—whatever they had discussed, Magdalena really didn’t want to repeat it here.

Well, Detlinde did manage to stun even the first wife of Dunkelfelger. I’d like to think she didn’t repeat what she said in the closed-stack archive to Magdalena’s face, but you never know with her...

Detlinde had said some pretty rude things even during Royal Academy tea parties—but that had been to lower-ranking nobles, and it had only been bad enough to inspire a few wrinkled brows. Plus, now that Aub Ahrensbach was gone, she was due to become the highest authority in Ahrensbach; it was hard to imagine her being discourteous to the royal family and putting her entire duchy at risk. One’s retainers would normally stop at nothing to prevent such a thing from happening.

However, Magdalena’s refusal to discuss the matter made me extremely concerned. It really did seem like Detlinde had proclaimed herself the next Zent in front of an existing royal. Her blatant, uh... *treachery* put her future husband, Ferdinand, in danger of being deemed guilty by association. At the very least, I was glad that their Starbind Ceremony had been delayed; Ferdinand couldn’t attend the Archduke Conference while he was still merely her fiancé, so he was presumably safe from punishment.

Wait, actually... Would it be best for me to obtain the Grutrissheit as soon as possible?

By doing so, I would secure the perfect bargaining chip. There was no point in coming to the negotiating table empty-handed, and there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that the royal family would spare Ferdinand in return for their beloved Grutrissheit. Anything else I

could offer would probably result in him getting punished anyway.

Am I worrying about this too much?

I placed a hand on my chest. If Detlinde really had been foolish enough to repeat what she had said in the archive to Magdalena, then it was only a matter of time before my fears became reality. Surely I was within my rights to keep quiet and worry about things for a bit.

The Book of Mestionora might not even be the Grutrissheit. Maybe it just serves as a stepping stone. Even then, it probably won't be easy to obtain. I'll search in secret for now.

I took some paper and writing utensils from Otilie, then went back into the underground archive. Schwartz looked up at me and said, "Milady. Not enough prayer." I only had the blue tablet inside of me, so that seemed like a fair evaluation.

I need to figure out where those other shrines are.

"Schwartz, is there a map of the Royal Academy with the locations of the shrines for prayer?" I asked. It was worth a shot.

"Yes," Schwartz replied, then took several slates from the rightmost end of one of the bookshelves. It would have taken me ages to reach them, considering that I always started at the top left.

"Thanks, Schwartz."

I gave the shumil a pat on the head, then started examining the maps. The crudest and the most detailed ones had markers in completely different places, so I still didn't have any definitive answers. I couldn't even see the dormitories or any other landmarks on them, so I was even more confused about where to go. I would need to make copies of the maps and then compare them to the ditter maps in the Ehrenfest Dormitory. That would probably take a while.

"Rozemyne! Time's up!"

"Eep?!"

I was working from one of the slates when it was suddenly snatched away from me. I stared up in shock and saw Sylvester handing it back to Schwartz.

"You really do block out the world around you when you read, huh?" he said. "Do you know how many times I called your name?"

"Not at all..."

"Hurry up and get ready to leave," he said, exasperated.

I handed my completed translations to Magdalena, then folded up my copies of the maps and put them in my pouch. "I didn't

expect you to come get me,” I said to Sylvester.

“Seemed pretty obvious to me. Can’t have Florencia entering a magic tool this big while she’s pregnant.”

As it turned out, one could describe the underground archive as a giant magic tool. There were those doors, to begin with, and only those who met strict mana criteria were able to enter. It was impossible to say what kind of an impact such a magic tool might have on an unborn child, which was why Sylvester didn’t want Florencia to come here.

“Does that mean you’re going to retrieve me every day?” I asked.

“That’s the plan. C’mon.” Sylvester offered me his hand, but I merely cocked my head at him. Was I supposed to grab it or something?

“What’s the holdup? My escort not good enough for you?”

“Oh, no... I just never expected you to escort someone other than Florencia.”

“If she were here, she would be my first choice.”

I reached out and grabbed on to Sylvester’s arm; then he escorted me out of the archive. It was strange—as we ascended the stairs, I actually felt a bit like a princess.

We exited the library and made our way down the dusky corridors; the sun had already begun to set. Back in my commoner days, I had sometimes walked hand in hand with my family and friends, but I couldn’t remember holding on to anybody’s arm like this. Even as a noble, I had only ever done this for banquets.

Sometimes I hold on to Grandfather’s finger, but that feels more like taking on a dangerous mission than being escorted. Besides, whenever I’m in the castle, I tend to just ride in my highbeast.

“Rozemyne, do you have to look so somber?”

“I’m simply not used to being escorted like this. To tell you the truth, I’m at something of a loss.”

“You aren’t used to it? But you’ve had plenty of experience with Ferdinand and Wilfried, haven’t you?”

Sylvester looked surprised, but I was completely bewildered. “Ferdinand would never escort me in a normal situation like this. Oh, but we did have a bit of an arrangement—anytime he was moving too fast, I would grab his sleeve, then he would slow down enough to keep me from falling on my face. He’d go from a light jog to a brisk walk.”

“Whaaat? That’s it?”

I desperately tried to remember the other things that Ferdinand had done for me. “Umm... whenever we rode his highbeast, he would help me climb up and then set me down again. Although that was only because I was too short to do either on my own...”

“And Wilfried...? You’re engaged, right?”

“He escorted me for the feast, but that was about it... Oh, when we have our archduke candidate classes, he carries my heavier belongings into the classroom for me, since my retainers can’t follow me inside.” It had impressed Hannelore and inspired her to say that I was engaged to someone very kind, so it was probably a good thing.

Sylvester gave a displeased frown. “I know you usually ride your highbeast in the castle, but come on. The heck is that boy doing when you two are walking together?”

“Well, I can’t think of any students who serve as escorts on a daily basis.”

“I did.”

Yeah, because you were looking for an excuse to spend time with Florencia. In any case, your situations really can’t be compared. You were desperately trying to get the girl of your dreams to notice you, whereas Wilfried is mechanically carrying out the functions of a political engagement.

That seemed obvious, but apparently Sylvester was kind to *all* women, not just Florencia. The men of the world could stand to learn a lot from him.

“You are far more considerate of women than Wilfried or Ferdinand, that is for sure. I must say—I am surprised.”

“As am I... How did my little brother end up so inept around women? Sure, he plays the part of a perfect gentleman during feasts and the like, but, what, he won’t even accompany someone on a daily basis?”

“The closer you are to Ferdinand, the less effort he puts into how he treats you.”

I was pretty sure that Sylvester had received the same lackluster treatment. Ferdinand often acted with exceptional attention to detail, and on the rare occasions when he was kind, he was *really* kind... but actually interacting with him could be pretty rough.

The next thing I knew, Sylvester was looking down at me with a conflicted smile. “What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing serious. Just occurred to me that some things only time can reveal.”

“Well, if we’re being honest... You might want to start acting a bit younger. You’ve been way too curmudgeonly as of late.”

“And whose fault do you think that is?”

My own, without a doubt... Sorry.

I was starting to feel nostalgic—Benno had used to scold me just like this—when I suddenly remembered that I needed to have a very important discussion with Sylvester. “As much as it pains me to say this, I need to tell you something that might age you another year or two.”

“I don’t really wanna hear it, but I’m guessing I don’t have a choice...” Sylvester replied with a grimace, urging me to continue. We were still moving through the corridors, and our retainers were within earshot, but this matter wasn’t “clear the room” important.

“So... the Starbind Ceremony caused a magic circle to appear, hm?”

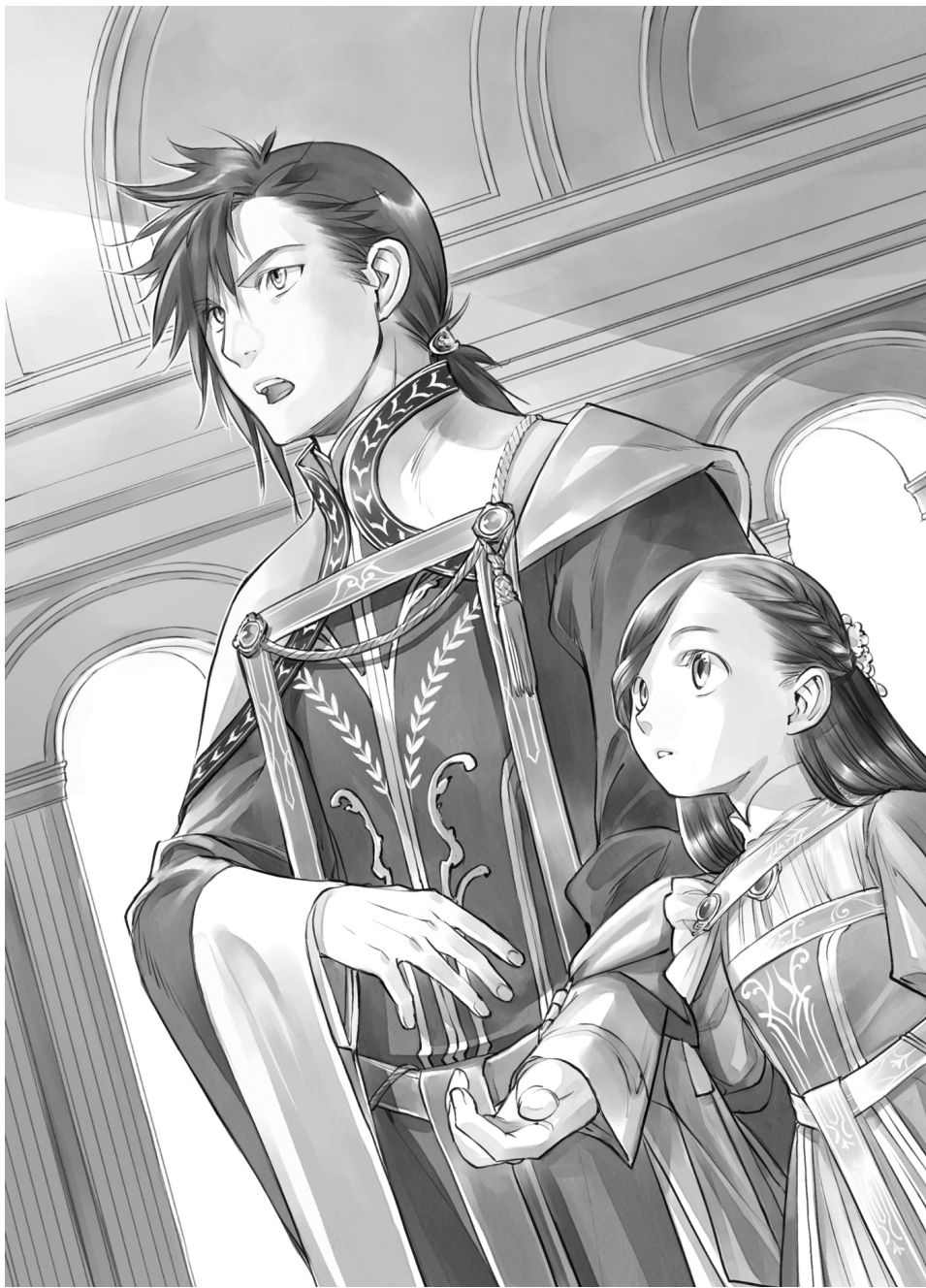
“Yeah. What about it?”

“I didn’t notice at the time, since I was gazing upward in prayer, but that was the same circle that appeared during Lady Detlinde’s coming-of-age ceremony—the one for selecting Zent candidates.”

It seemed that the audience had accepted Sigiswald as the next Zent. That was a good thing in itself, but the circle was simply one part of the selection process. Merely activating it did not a Zent make.

“I can see why the Sovereign temple was so desperate to revive ancient rituals in their quest to obtain a true Zent...” I murmured. “Of course, they won’t get very far without a High Bishop who can perform them—and they’re sure to want my help after the success of the ceremony.”

Sylvester patted my right hand, which was still wrapped around his left arm. “Relax. Your engagement to Wilfried has the king’s approval; I’m not about to cancel it.”



Maybe not, but what if I obtain the Grutrissheit and end up qualified to become the next Zent? Worst-case scenario, I want to be prepared to rescue Ferdinand.

Sylvester was going all out to protect me while at the same time insisting that we treat Ferdinand as an outsider from Ahrensbach. I wondered how he would react to finding out that I was a Zent candidate now, but I wasn't going to tell him—not when I didn't have the slightest desire to rule Yurgenschmidt. Instead, I reported that Detlinde had come to the underground archive, and repeated what she had said.

"I don't know what Schlaftraum's flowers are supposed to represent," I said, "but they can only be obtained in Ahrensbach, it would seem. And there appears to be some kind of connection between Lady Georgine and the Sovereign knight commander."

"Interesting."

"You're going to report the silver cloth we found to the royal family, right?" I asked. "I believe it would be wise to tell them in an environment *without* the knight commander."

Sylvester frowned. He had barely ever seen the Sovereign knight commander before. He was completely unaware that the man had deemed Ferdinand to be an enemy or that he was responsible for Ferdinand being sent to Ahrensbach. I didn't intend to tell him either; Ferdinand had said that he wasn't going to tell Sylvester, and my understanding of the Adalgisa situation was far from perfect.

Once we were back in the dormitory, I went to the communal bookcase, which stored documents for the knight course, and retrieved the map once used during old ditter preparations. The adults were busy preparing for tomorrow and onward, so I elected to return to my room before getting to work.

"Lady Rozemyne, what might you be doing?" Leonore asked, peering down at the ditter map with great interest. Her curiosity came as no surprise, considering that I was just looking through documents for the knight course.

I spread out the maps I had copied and started comparing the locations of the shrines. "There were maps in the underground archive that seemed to show the locations of other shrines like the

one we saw today. They were rather slipshod, so I am still unsure which of the markers are correct, but I thought that comparing them to this map might be enlightening... Oh, is this circle where we found today's shrine?"

"It appears to be just south of the library, so I would imagine so." She began pointing at the other circles on the map. "This one is near the scholar building, while this one is a short distance from the attendant building... Lady Rozemyne, do they not seem to be placed at equidistant intervals, with the central building as, well, the center?"

I stared at the six large, equally sized circles on the map. Now that she mentioned it, that did appear to be the case.

"But what about these smaller circles here?" I asked.

"Perhaps they indicate something else."

"I shall report these findings tomorrow in the underground archive," I said, then started clearing away the maps. I wanted to visit the rest of the shrines during the Archduke Conference; once winter returned, they would all be engulfed in snow, and traveling to them would be much too unreasonable.

But how? The others won't let me go just because I tell them that I want to.

It would be strange for an underage student who wasn't even supposed to be at the Archduke Conference in the first place to start wandering the Royal Academy's grounds, and my retainers wouldn't let me go without a good reason. For what it was worth, telling them that I was trying to get the Grutrisheit to save Ferdinand—and also so that I could read it—would probably only make everyone annoyed at me.

The next day, I returned to the underground archive. Anastasius and Eglantine were there when I arrived; again, they were going to spend the morning transcribing documents.

"I investigated the locations of the shrines," I said, spreading out my maps as I started giving my report. "It would appear that they sit at equidistant intervals, forming a circle around the central building. Does that not just exude mystery?"

"That certainly seems suspicious..." Anastasius said, squinting down at my maps. "I will ask the royal library to search for more detailed documents."

"There is no need, Prince Anastasius," Magdalena said. "I

contacted them yesterday.” She had already made good use of everything we had told her, however small.

Anastasius thanked her, then stood up. “I would like to see these shrines for myself. Describing them to Father would prove difficult otherwise.”

“Indeed...” Magdalena said, and stood up as well. It seemed that, with Hildebrand as a guide, the royals would all be going to check out yesterday’s shrine.

Hannelore and I stayed in the archive and continued translating. The atmosphere was so much more comfortable when we weren’t in the presence of the royal family.

“I did not hesitate to start reading the Fernestine volume that you lent me yesterday,” Hannelore said. “In fact, I became so immersed in it that Cordula ended up scolding me. I must admit to being a tad sleep-deprived today.” Even after being chastised, she had apparently soldiered on, reading all the way up to the part where the prince raced off to save Fernestine. Only then had she calmed down enough to sleep—but she was still eager to read the rest.

“I cannot wait to reach the end,” she said.

We continued our translating until Anastasius and the others returned from the shrine. Eglantine looked very sickly and was eyeing me as though there was something on her mind.

“Is something the matter, Lady Eglantine?”

“Lady Rozemyne, I wish to consult you about something. May I have a moment of your time?”

Anastasius glared at me, but I only had one answer to give: “I would be delighted to offer my assistance.”

Consultation

The archive was too public for whatever Eglantine wished to discuss, so I was invited to have tea at her villa. It must have been urgent, because she wanted us to meet tomorrow morning. The only thing on my schedule right now was my translation work, and this was an invitation from Eglantine; any time would do.

“What exactly do you intend to discuss with Rozemyne?” Anastasius demanded.

“That is...” Eglantine paused. “I will inform you *after* our discussion.”

“That makes it sound as if you don’t intend to allow me to join.” His voice was low and tinged with anger, but not even he could sway his wife; she simply returned a firm glare and replied without hesitation.

“It is Lady Rozemyne whom I wish to speak to. Do sit tomorrow out.”

“I refuse. Things always get out of hand when Rozemyne is involved. I must be fully aware of the situation at all times, which is why I cannot leave you two alone.”

Eglantine and Anastasius’s battle continued. Personally, I didn’t care whether he attended, but I hoped that he would at least spare me from any dirty looks if this quarrel ended in his defeat.

I’m more concerned that Lady Eglantine looks so unwell...

It seemed to me that Anastasius should care for his sickly wife rather than argue with her, but he was dead set on joining our tea party. In any case, my involvement would only complicate matters further, so I decided to take my leave and return to translating.

Prince Anastasius’s profound jealousy always proves troublesome. Into the archive I go.

I quickly disengaged from their lovers’ quarrel, but Otilie was less accustomed to dealing with royalty and struggled to follow my example. She caught me on my way to the door and whispered to me, “Lady Rozemyne, what will your schedule be for tomorrow? We did not anticipate that you would attend such a tea party during

the Archduke Conference, so preparations will need to be made and the aub will need to be informed.”

From outfits to gifts, there was plenty that needed to be considered when meeting with royalty. My plans were up in the air until a winner was decided, and that meant my attendants couldn't yet do their job. Not to mention, we were completely unprepared for such an event; I had been told to stay hidden during the Archduke Conference, which obviously meant no tea parties. Ottilie's head was presumably spinning.

“Who can say?” I replied, then looked at Eglantine and Anastasius with a troubled hand on my cheek. “We will need to wait until a decision has been made.”

Magdalena set down her teacup, rose from her seat, and elegantly approached the quarreling couple. Then, with an exaggerated sigh, she said, “Prince Anastasius, Lady Eglantine, this is unsightly.”

“Lady Magdalena...”

She was getting right in their faces, and it made me respect her from the bottom of my heart. I could never have done something so bold—and the same must have been true for Hannelore, who was simply watching from a comfortable distance.

“Prince Anastasius,” Magdalena continued, her exasperation clear, “do you not know why Geduldh the Goddess of Earth chose to avoid Ewigeliebe the God of Life, and sought the protection of those around her? Perhaps you should reenroll at the Royal Academy and repeat your studies of the divine.”

Anastasius twitched. His dour expression was exactly how I imagined the God of Life had looked when he was first rejected by the Goddess of Earth.

“There are some things that a woman might only wish to discuss with other women,” Magdalena explained. “Lady Eglantine has the magnanimity to hear your will at most times; she must have an especially good reason to refuse you now. Is it not the duty of a husband to understand such things and act accordingly? If you continue to bind her so tightly, as the God of Life did to the Goddess of Earth, then you will only earn her ire.”

Then, after threatening Anastasius into silence, she turned her red eyes upon Eglantine. “As for you, Lady Eglantine, I would advise that you take more time to think before you speak. You know a perfect reason for excluding Prince Anastasius, do you not?

If you do not conclude such debates *before* speaking with Lady Rozemyne, then your husband will end up directing his dissatisfaction at her.”

Eglantine looked up with a start, then shot Anastasius and me concerned glances.

Magdalena’s eyes softened as she continued, “Sudden invitations from the royal family trouble not only those who receive them but their retainers and duchy as well. The burden is heavy indeed. Although we can attribute some of this to your apparent poor health, I must say that you were rather inconsiderate.”

“It would seem that I allowed my composure to slip... My apologies for my lack of thought,” Eglantine said to Magdalena and me. “Lady Rozemyne, I must apologize to you twice over. Although I do wish to speak with you at once, our discussion will have to wait.”

Eglantine had it rough; she couldn’t even host a tea party without first needing to placate her husband. I replied that she need not worry about me, thanked Magdalena for having resolved the issue, then finally made for the archive. As I went, I caught a glimpse of Otilie’s relief at the tea party having been delayed.

I continued my translation work until Sylvester arrived to get me; then the two of us headed back to the dormitory. On the way there, I informed him of Eglantine’s plan to invite me to a tea party. The news must have come as a surprise, because he immediately recoiled.

“Why are *you* getting invited over *me*, the aub?” he asked, stung. “Can she not just tell you whatever’s on her mind at the library? If we send you to that royal villa, I expect you’re going to cause all kinds of trouble. Tell her that I want to be there too.”

“Lady Eglantine has yet to tell me what she wishes to discuss, but I imagine it has something to do with religious matters. She asked me about the temple once before.”

Sylvester stared down at me, unconvinced. “So she wants to consult you, huh...? You may be their best bet, seeing as the royal family and the Sovereign temple are on such bad terms, but... I don’t feel good about this.”

“Prince Anastasius said that he wanted to join us for the same reason. Lady Eglantine refused, though, and we haven’t yet agreed on a date.”

“Doesn’t seem like there’s much chance of me getting in, then. I

assume Lady Eglantine's more trustworthy, at least?" He sighed, his expression betraying his suffering.

"I'll inform you when the details have been settled. Nothing's been decided yet, after all."

"Right. Don't forget."

In the end, Anastasius finally conceded; as he saw it, missing the tea party was better than having his wife resent him. An ordonnanz arrived for me not long after my return to the dormitory and announced that I was to meet Eglantine in two days' time. Until then, I would continue my translation work as normal. It seemed that I wouldn't have time to go shrine hunting.

That's a shame, but our preliminary investigation is just as important, I thought. There was no point hurrying out to visit the shrines when I didn't even know their exact locations yet.

"Angelica, Damuel, how did you spend the day?" I asked after dinner. They couldn't enter the underground archive and were, to my knowledge, keeping watch outside the library.

"I monitored the library's outer corridor," Angelica replied, immediately confirming my assumption.

Damuel nodded. "Cornelius and Leonore told us to remain vigilant, as Lady Detlinde could visit again."

I paused in thought. "Could one of you use this map to investigate the locations of the shrines? As I understand it, they can be found at regular intervals around the central building, so it shouldn't be too hard to find them once we have a general idea of where they are. You may take turns."

I showed them the map in question, and they readily agreed. Guarding the same place day in, day out was exhausting in its own right, so they would take turns hunting for the shrines and swap at noon.

"What do you intend to do once the shrines have been found, Lady Rozemyne?" Clarissa suddenly asked. She was supposed to be working with the other scholars in preparation for tomorrow, so I was surprised to see her wriggle into our conversation. Still, I offered my response with a smile.

"I intend to clean them. They house the gods, and it certainly wouldn't do to leave them so filthy. I cleaned the shrine we found the other day, and might I add that your magic circle for enhancing wide-area magic was of great assistance. I would appreciate having some for the other shrines as well, but—"

“Consider it done. I am honored that you found my research useful, Lady Rozemyne! But might I ask *how* you used the circle, exactly?” She had yet to piece together that I’d paired it with my waschen, but Damuel explained on my behalf.

“I see...” Clarissa murmured. “My research was used to perform a large-scale spell. To think I was unable to witness it with my own eyes... Oh, what vibrant colors the droplets must have shone as Lady Rozemyne brought life back to the shrine...” Her eyes were wet with sorrowful tears.

“Lady Hannelore was there with us,” I said, “so I expect that everything we have discussed is already known to Dunkelfelger. However, as this all occurred while we were assisting the royal family, I must ask that you keep it to yourself. That goes for you as well, Hartmut; I can tell that you are eavesdropping.”

“Understood.”

As we continued our discussion, Otilie and Lieselea were busily preparing for the royal meeting. They were finding it a struggle, since Rihyarda and Brunhilde had taken care of such dealings in the past, but at least Rihyarda was still around as Sylvester’s attendant; we would need to request her assistance with the clothes, gifts, and so on.

“Lady Rozemyne, to think that every day is like this when you are at the Royal Academy...” Otilie said with a wry smile, having never done business with the royal family before. “That explains why Gretia is unusually well trained despite being so new to your retinue.”

“Lady Rozemyne, I thank you ever so much for coming.”

After our greetings, Eglantine took a demonstrative sip of tea and then bit into one of the provided sweets. It really felt strange to be alone with her, without Anastasius breathing down our necks.

“I am glad to see that your health has improved,” I said. “It really did concern me when I saw how pale you had gotten after visiting the shrine.”

“I am sorry to have worried you. I simply used too much mana and needed time to recover.”

“Did you clean the shrine as well, Lady Eglantine?” I was unsure how else she might have used so much mana.

At once, Eglantine’s bright orange eyes widened, then she giggled. “There was no need; it was still positively sparkling from

your own visit.”

Eglantine and Anastasius shared a villa now that they were married, but it was still only the two of us here—Anastasius had gone to the underground archive to work, while Eglantine had asked everybody else to leave the room. Still, she proffered to me a sound-blocking magic tool.

“I never expected you to be so firm with Prince Anastasius,” I remarked, sipping my tea.

She smiled. “I should find it easier to involve him after we have had our discussion.”

“And what is it that you wish to discuss? I will assist you however I can.”

“As you know, I went to check the shrine before I asked you to meet with me,” Eglantine said, watching me closely. She went on to explain that she had touched the door, felt it suck out some of her mana, and then suddenly appeared inside the shrine.

That’s basically what happened to me.

Well, except for the mana part. Eglantine had said that she felt some get sucked out from her schtappe, but that hadn’t been the case for me.

Unless... Did it take so little that I just didn’t notice?

I was covered in feystone charms at all times, so mana was always being sucked out of me. One could say that I was largely numb to the sensation; only when I lost a significant amount of mana did I actually notice it.

Eglantine continued, “The shrine was dedicated to the God of Fire and his subordinates. As I gazed up at the statue of Leidenschaft, I was struck with the compulsion to pray. So, I performed a dedication whirl.”

Hmm... I prayed to grow up.

As it turned out, one’s reaction to appearing before the gods depended on the individual. The idea of whirling hadn’t even occurred to me. Perhaps dedication whirls were ingrained in Eglantine’s mind as what one did to offer prayers to the gods.

“My mana was sucked out on its own, entirely as though I were wearing feystones atop the auditorium’s stage,” Eglantine said, “but I thought nothing of it and continued to whirl. As I offered more mana, a blue feystone began to form in Leidenschaft’s hands.”

Oh? Leidenschaft already had a blue slate when I entered. I guess I never saw it as a feystone, because I noticed the shining text on it from

the very beginning. It must depend on how much mana one offers beforehand.

I remembered the blue slate feeling like a combination of the mana I'd previously offered and a Divine Will, so I was probably on the right track.

"My whirling drained almost all of my mana, so I used one of the rejuvenation potions I keep on my hip. They are not as effective as the ones you distributed, Lady Rozemyne, but they are still quite powerful."

Eglantine had used a royal rejuvenation potion to recover her mana. Then, she informed me, she had once again felt compelled to pray.

"Come again?" I asked. "You prayed immediately after your mana recovered...?"

"Indeed. I felt the need to."

In the end, Eglantine had made one offering after another until she had used up every single one of her rejuvenation potions.

"By the time I was finished," she said, "the blue feystone had grown to be rather large. Still, the text on it informed me that I needed to pray even more."

Just how much mana do you intend to squeeze out of her, O mighty Leidenschaft?!

"Exhausted of mana, I was expelled from the shrine. It seemed to me as though I had spent an eternity inside, but I returned to find that no time had passed at all. Nobody else seemed to have entered the shrine either."

Eglantine had deduced that Anastasius hadn't been inside because he had apparently touched the door and said, "So it really is locked." As for Magdalena, she hadn't reacted in the slightest.

"So, Lady Rozemyne, is that shrine not a place for Zent candidates to offer their prayers?" Eglantine asked. "The underground archive contains a record about a past Zent, describing how they would continuously circle the Royal Academy and pray. I cannot help but wonder what happens when one has prayed enough and the blue feystone is complete."

"I am just as curious," I replied. There being a Zent candidate in the royal family meant that it was in my best interests to feign ignorance and remain as detached from the matter as I could. Being foolishly honest and admitting that I was already in possession of one blue slate would do more to antagonize the royals than

anything Detlinde had managed so far.

“You would say that despite having entered the shrine yourself, Lady Rozemyne?”

“Pray tell, what makes you think I did...?”

“You have prayed more than most and obtained enough divine protections, I would think. You also showed not a hint of surprise at the tale I just told you.”

Uh-oh. She was right. My focus had immediately turned to comparing our experiences, so it hadn’t even occurred to me to feign surprise. I’d merely listened with a poker face.

“Oh, but I *was* surprised. So surprised that I found myself unable to speak. And, speaking of surprises, I was especially stunned when you whirled atop the auditorium’s stage wearing feystones,” I said, changing the topic of our conversation. “Was that the royal family’s attempt to make the circle shine?”

Eglantine smiled. “Quite so. You and Lord Ferdinand said that it was for selecting Zent candidates, correct? After the graduating students repeated the divine protections ritual, so, too, did the royal family. We also attempted to activate the circle.”

Those of the royal family had adorned themselves with feystones and whirled while expending mana; Detlinde had managed to trigger the magic circle, so they were confident that they would succeed as well. In the process, Trauerqual, Sigiswald, Anastasius, and Eglantine had caused the circle to light up.

“Prince Sigiswald, Anastasius, and the Zent all became omni-elemental through their newly obtained divine protections,” Eglantine informed me, “yet I was the only one drawn into the shrine. It makes no sense; what differs between Anastasius and me?”

“Your schtappes,” I replied.

“Oh?” She blinked at me in surprise.

“Have you not yet heard from Lady Magdalena? A slate I translated at the end of yesterday explained how to use the large and small shrines.”

The smaller shrines were dedicated to the subordinate gods, and praying at them would create feystones like the one Eglantine had described. Obtaining those feystones would strengthen one’s elements. Performing the divine protections ritual after obtaining feystones from all of the subordinates would secure the divine protection of the primary gods as well, so the past Zent had prayed

almost nonstop while attending the Royal Academy.

“You can only obtain a schtappe once, correct?” I asked. “That is why the Zent who wrote the slate was desperate to obtain the protection of each primary god before he graduated. Zent candidates must acquire their schtappes in the Garden of Beginnings. As you were omni-elemental from the start, Lady Eglantine, I expect that was where you obtained yours?”

“This is my first time hearing the name, but yes, it would serve as an apt description of where I obtained my schtappe. It was a strange place with a white tree,” she said, in a bit of a daze. Then her shoulders slumped. “But does that not mean Prince Sigiswald cannot become a Zent candidate? He did not have every element when he obtained his schtappe...”

Anastasius hadn’t been sucked into the shrine after becoming omni-elemental through the ritual, so I doubted that Sigiswald would either.

“It might be possible for Prince Hildebrand,” I noted. “If we return to the old custom of students obtaining their schtappes immediately before their graduation, have him pray at the small shrines to increase his elements, and ensure that he obtains divine protections from all of the primary gods during his ritual, then he should also become a Zent candidate.”

He had already proven his determination—compressing mana at his young age was no easy feat—so he would probably manage somehow. It would also benefit Eglantine; if she didn’t want to stand at the forefront, then Hildebrand could simply work hard in her stead. It was bound to be possible now that we knew how to obtain the protections of the primary gods.

The problem would be whether the current Zent can last until Prince Hildebrand comes of age.

I thought it was good that the royal family had another potential Zent candidate, but Eglantine’s face clouded over. “Lady Rozemyne, it has already been announced that Prince Sigiswald will next take the throne. If either Prince Hildebrand or I become a Zent candidate, Yurgenschmidt will face war once again.”

The Sovereignty was already in the process of establishing Sigiswald as the next king—he had managed to trigger the magic circle, then his Starbind Ceremony had received a blessing on a level never seen before. Giving the position to Hildebrand or Eglantine was no longer an option; doing so would cause far too

much chaos.

"I understand your desire not to bring about any further conflict," I said, "but is the absence of a Grutrissheit not the most pressing issue facing Yurgenschmidt right now? Should its return not be prioritized so that the border gates can finally be reopened and duchy borders redrawn? Plus, although there might be trouble if you or Hildebrand obtain the Grutrissheit, either outcome is still much better than it going to someone outside of the royal family."

"That is true, but..."

After marrying Anastasius, Eglantine was now royalty as well, but she was still reluctant to acquire the Grutrissheit. I couldn't blame her; losing so many family members to assassination during the previous conflict must have been traumatizing.

Mm... Maybe it really would be best for me to obtain the Grutrissheit myself, then give it to Prince Sigiswald on the condition that he return Ferdinand to Ehrenfest...

Eglantine was mentally cornered; she couldn't discuss this matter with Anastasius, since he hadn't been accepted into the shrine.

I considered my options, though I did not voice them. It seemed likely that I was closer to obtaining the Grutrissheit than anyone, simply because of how much I had prayed since enrolling at the Royal Academy. The blue slate had already been whole by the time I entered the shrine, and it seemed reasonable to assume that I could obtain the others without much of a struggle.

However... Ferdinand told me that the Grutrissheit was in the forbidden archive, which only royalty could enter.

There were still plenty of documents in the underground archive that I'd yet to read; it was entirely possible that some unknown factor would stop me from becoming the Zent, even after obtaining slates from all of the primary gods' shrines. For that reason, it was best not to give them any strange ideas.

Not to mention...

The royal family obviously wouldn't overlook a Zent candidate who seemed capable of obtaining the Grutrissheit through the shrines. If they were set on Sigiswald taking the throne, then they would probably make me marry him. Worst-case scenario, they'd simply kill me and take the Grutrissheit by force. It was best to remain silent; I didn't want to leave Ehrenfest, where my family was.

I put on a noble smile and said, “Perhaps further research in the underground archive will reveal what must be done to get Prince Sigiswald a Grutrissheit.” Of course, I didn’t believe that in the slightest; it was little more than nice-sounding nonsense.

Eglantine gave me a searching look, then cast her eyes down. “I thank you ever so much for lending me your ear, Lady Rozemyne.”

I took my leave and returned to the dormitory—whereupon I received some exciting news from Damuel and Angelica. They had found all of the primary gods’ shrines marked on the map I’d given them.

Circling the Shrines

Although we now knew the locations of the shrines, I was too busy with the underground archive to actually visit them. There had to be a work-around of some kind. In an ideal world, I would repeat what we had done for the first shrine and go there with Hildebrand or Hannelore, but that wasn't viable when we were under strict orders not to wander around outside.

I guess I wouldn't mind sharing the locations with Lady Eglantine if she wanted to visit them herself...

Unable to think of any satisfying ideas, I made my way to the underground archive, where Eglantine and Anastasius were once again going to be spending the morning. It was a day like any other, but when I went to enter the archive with my writing utensils in hand—

“Lady Rozemyne, do wait a moment.”

I turned around and said, “Yes, Lady Eglantine?” She was wearing a smile like a blooming flower, while Anastasius looked quite bitter beside her.

“There is a change of plans for today—I must ask you to visit the shrines with us. I wish to see your large-scale cleaning magic for myself. Among some other things, perhaps...”

Anastasius then elaborated, “You are the only one who can clean them so quickly.” That confirmed it: this was the will of the royal family.

So that's how they're going to play this, hm?

This was the consequence of my being so vague with Eglantine. They were going to force me to enter the shrines while watching me the entire time.

I really didn't want to believe they would resort to being so forceful, but... here we are.

There was a sudden heaviness in the pit of my stomach, as though I'd just swallowed a rock, but my options were painfully limited. After hanging my head in defeat, I reluctantly followed Eglantine and Anastasius out of the library with my retainers in

tow. I was in my highbeast, of course; Anastasius was taking us to the shrine on the other side of the scholar building, and there was no way I was going to keep up with the adults on foot.

“Rozemyne. Here,” Anastasius said, then offered me a sound-blocker. I took it and gazed up at him, only to see him looking back at me in displeasure. “It would seem you kept secrets from Eglantine in that meeting of yours, even after she went out of her way to exclude me. She was despondent last night, you know.”

“If anyone should feel despondent, it is I. It was outright malicious of Lady Eglantine to ask me questions that my status prevents me from answering.”

Saying that I couldn’t enter the shrine would have gotten me accused of lying to the royal family. Admitting that I could and that I’d acquired a slate wouldn’t have done me any better; I would have been deemed an even greater traitor than Detlinde, whose transgressions thus far extended no further than some treasonous remarks.

Can I really be blamed for keeping my silence?

No matter how much I wanted to hide the truth, I couldn’t refuse a royal order; I would need to touch the shrine if they told me to. It depressed me that these two, of all people, were being so forceful. I’d never thought that my noble-like response to Eglantine would end with me being made to reveal my secrets.

“My apologies,” Eglantine said. “I do this only because I am left with no other options.”

No matter how cutely she apologized, the tightness in my chest remained. I assumed she was looking for a secret technique of some kind that would allow Sigiswald to enter the shrines, thereby circumventing another war, but I didn’t have the answers she sought. At most, I could only suggest that we continue reading the archive’s tablets. I certainly couldn’t admit that I wanted to obtain the Book of Mestionora, read it, then use it as a bargaining chip to ensure that Ferdinand wouldn’t get punished.

“You must have entered that shrine,” Anastasius reasoned. “You’ve prayed so often, obtained so many divine protections, controlled divine instruments at will, and performed countless ceremonies. Why even try to hide it?”

“As I recall, it was *you* who told me to learn how much information is worth and not disclose it freely. Should you not praise me for having taken your lesson to heart?”

“Rozemyne,” he said, his eyes narrowed.

“Are you going to order me to tell you everything?”

“Yes. Anything that you attempt to hide will surely evolve into something monstrous behind the scenes. It is because we have been honest with each other that things have gone well so far, is it not? I see no reason for us to change that now. There is no world in which someone as religious as you would not be allowed into the shrines.” Instead of commending me for acting like a true noble, he was ordering me not to hide anything from him.

“Perhaps I am at fault here, since it was my own behavior that has led you to scold me, but let it be known that I cannot provide the convenient solution that Lady Eglantine seeks.”

I was telling the truth, but Anastasius merely raised an eyebrow at me and said, “I wonder about that...” I could tell from his expression that he doubted me, but the only thing I was keeping to myself was a comment much too rude to say.

Sigiswald couldn’t enter the shrine because he hadn’t been omni-elemental when he obtained his schtappe. He hadn’t been omni-elemental because the royal family hadn’t read the documents in the underground archive, which detailed the importance of elements. They hadn’t read those documents not only because of the colossal death toll of the civil war and purge, and the abundance of knowledge that had been lost as a result, but also because none of the royals could read or had studied ancient language.

To be frank, none of this was my fault. It wasn’t because of me that people could only obtain their schtappe once, nor was I in a position to change things. Was it really so bad of me to think that Eglantine or Hildebrand should visit the shrines, since they were the only members of the royal family who could plausibly obtain the Grutrissheit? Nobles would consider that a lot more acceptable than they would it going to someone from Ehrenfest. I could only think of one way for Sigiswald to be the next king without being able to obtain the Grutrissheit himself.

“Can anyone blame me for wanting to keep quiet when it is obvious how the royal family would respond to my being able to enter the shrines?” I asked. “I would rather die than leave my family in Ehrenfest to become the third wife of a man whose second marriage I just recently blessed.”

“So you’ve learned to use your head...” Anastasius muttered.

“Does this mean you will speak openly instead of waving off my

questions?” Eglantine giggled, wearing her usual soft smile. She had completely ignored the “I would rather die” part of my response. “I understand how you feel, Lady Rozemyne, but we must avoid war in the Sovereignty at all costs; peace has only recently begun to return. Obtaining the Gruttrissheit is of the utmost importance. You will assist us, correct?”

I averted my eyes. Their position made enough sense that I couldn't just refuse—but, at the same time, I really didn't want to agree. They continued to pressure me with silent smiles as we passed the professors' herb garden by the scholar building and soon arrived at the shrine.

“So there truly are more shrines...” the royal retainers said, unable to hide their surprise. My own retainers were too concerned about my situation to react; their eyes darted from Eglantine to Anastasius to me.

I returned the sound-blocking magic tool to Anastasius, then smiled at my retainers. “We were simply discussing how to clean the shrines.” I climbed out of my Pandabus, then used a large-scale waschen. The filth vanished in a heartbeat, leaving the area positively sparkling.

“How wonderful,” Eglantine said with a smile, clearly impressed.

“Rozemyne,” Anastasius added, “check to see whether the door is locked.”

I did as he instructed, my heart heavy. No sooner had my fingers brushed the door than I was sucked through.

“Is this... the God of Darkness's shrine?”

Just like in Leidenschaft's, there were thirteen statues lined up before me. The centermost one depicted the God of Darkness himself, wearing a large cape that sparkled as wonderfully as the night sky. In its hand was a feystone slate, as expected, but this one was black rather than blue. It was complete, unlike the one Eglantine had described, so I could already see the text on it.

“Guess I should still offer a prayer. Just to be safe.”

Hesitant to reach for the slate without praying at all, I raised both of my hands and my left leg. “O God of Darkness, O Sterrat the God of Stars, O Verbergen the God of Concealment, O Verdraeos the God of Deliverance... Distance me from this troublesome royal family who think only of themselves and make such cruel demands of me. Praise be to the gods!”

I was praying out of anger. Among the God of Darkness's subordinates was the God of Deliverance, who would ideally take care of the royal family for me.

"Oh, the text on this slate differs from what I saw in the God of Fire's shrine. Let's see here... 'Speak the name I granted thee?'"

Er, whose name? The God of Darkness's?

All of a sudden, the name that had been emblazoned in my mind during my third-year practical lessons resurfaced. "Praise be to Schicksantracht, the God of Darkness," I said, which caused the black slate to suck out some of my mana, and the text on its surface to change.

"Your prayers have reached me, and your worth has been acknowledged. I shall now grant you a word necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora. This word alone, however, will not suffice; a Zent candidate must obtain the words of the other gods as well."

I finished reading the text, then the black slate went into me and fused with my internal schtappe. Once it was gone, Schicksantracht's word came to my mind.

"Willedeal."

An instant later, I was outside the shrine again. My eyes met those of Anastasius and Eglantine, who were staring at me intently—determined not to miss the moment when I was sucked through the door, no doubt. I could tell that trying to lie to them and say that it hadn't worked simply wouldn't fly.

"Well, now there are black lines..." I said.

"Excuse me?"

Above the shrine there were now black lines as well as blue. Eglantine and Anastasius followed my eyes, then exchanged glances of confusion.

I gave them both a vague smile. "Shall we visit the other shrines?"

Eglantine blinked at me in disbelief, then looked worried. "Will your body hold...?"

"Indeed. I am fine at the moment. Though I would surely collapse without my highbeast."

Part of me wanted to collapse on the spot and ruin their plans out of spite, but Lessy meant that I wasn't using much stamina at all. I wasn't using much mana either, unfortunately.

"That side path would get us to the next shrine sooner," I called out as Anastasius and Eglantine went to return to the scholar

building. They turned to me, at which point I gestured toward a thin track leading through the forest. It seemed to shine for me but most likely didn't for anyone else here; it was presumably the route that Zent candidates of the past had used to circle the shrines.

Anastasius squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. "Climb into your highbeast, Rozemyne. We will go to the next one." Then, without a moment's hesitation, he started down the forest path. He must have gathered the location of the next shrine, in part thanks to my saying that they were at equidistant intervals around the Royal Academy.

As we made our way through the forest, Anastasius handed me the magic tool again. He confirmed that I was holding it and then said, "My brother will take you as his third wife. That will solve everything."

"No, it won't. As eager as I am to read a book belonging to a goddess, I don't want to marry Prince Sigiswald." Yes, his suggestion would "solve everything" for the royal family... but what about my own wants?

"Eglantine does not want to be the reason for another war, and she fears becoming the next Zent. If she obtains the Grutrissheit, the top-ranking duchies will all move at once, beginning with Klassenberg."

Now he was really ticking me off—he was thinking about granting Eglantine's wish and nothing else. "Indeed, neither the royal family nor the Sovereignty would suffer if you thrust this war upon me and made Ehrenfest accountable to the top-ranking duchies, but do you really think we would roll over and accept that? I already have a fiancé in Ehrenfest, and my intention is to remain there."

"Yes," Anastasius remarked, "you said as much during that exchange with Dunkelfelger." I could tell from his tone that he still wasn't going to budge.

I pursed my lips at the two royals. "So, in short... neither of you care about Ehrenfest in the slightest."

Eglantine looked at me. "We do not wish your duchy ill, but its suffering is a small price to pay to avoid war in the Sovereignty. You must understand that, surely." As it turned out, she felt as personally disconnected from Ehrenfest as I did from the Sovereignty.

"Above all else," Anastasius continued, "I must prioritize

Yurgenschmidt, the Sovereignty, and the royal family. That I would show such deep concern for Eglantine should go without saying. If my suggestion today is necessary to soothe her heart and ease her concerns, then what else can I do? Ehrenfest may suffer, but only Ehrenfest will care.”

It was truly embittering to hear that the royal family cared so little about my feelings, especially after I’d agreed to do so much for them. Anastasius had outright admitted that he would disregard me entirely for the sake of those he cared about more.



“If you really mean to say that Ehrenfest should deal with its own problems, then does the same logic not apply to the Sovereignty?” I asked. “In the event that Lady Eglantine obtained the Grutrisseheit, Klassenberg would support her, and the Sovereign temple would no longer be able to protest. Imagine how much more devastating it would be for the book to end up in the hands of someone *not* in the royal family. Please refrain from poaching Ehrenfest’s archduke candidates one after another.”

“Be careful, Rozemyne,” Anastasius warned me with a glare. “You speak above your station.”

I glared at him in turn. “*You* told me not to hold anything back, Prince Anastasius. If you are going to order me by royal decree to marry Prince Sigiswald, then at least return Ferdinand to Ehrenfest. Losing him has left us all in a dire state.”

“That is not an option. Ahrensbach would collapse.”

I squeezed the sound-blocker, furious about the disparity of our treatment. “You certainly are quick to side with Ahrensbach. Should it not be made to deal with its own problems? That was your stance with Ehrenfest, after all. Tell me, what happened to your promise to treat Ehrenfest like the other duchies that won the civil war? You agreed to start during this very Archduke Conference. Does the royal family think so little of my duchy’s and my contributions?”

If they said yes and that this was simply how the royal family did things, then there wouldn’t be anything else I could do. Still, I was so frustrated that I wanted to gnash my teeth and gnaw on my lip.

Eglantine smiled at me. It was a condescending smile, as though she were watching a child throw a tantrum. “Your contributions are not insignificant in the least, Lady Rozemyne—but the fact of the matter is that Ahrensbach is more important and in a far more precarious situation than Ehrenfest.”

Ahrensbach was a greater duchy from the winning side of the civil war, and it was currently responsible for half of Old Werkestock. It was vastly more important than Ehrenfest, boasting more land, a larger population, and Yurgenschmidt’s only open country gate, and it was much worse off as well. At present, there were only two adults among its archducal family—three if you counted Ferdinand. That really wasn’t enough to support a greater

duchy.

I get that Ahrensbach is suffering from a lack of archduke candidates, but isn't that a result of their weird tradition of reducing all other candidates to archnobles every time there's a change of archduke? It seems unfair that Ferdinand—and Ehrenfest—should suffer because of another duchy's customs.

“So you mean to tell me that my contributions to the royal family never mattered,” I said. “My desires were always going to be overruled.”

“That isn't true,” Anastasius replied. “There are some things we can do and some things we cannot. Your request for us to return Ferdinand may seem feasible, but he is the sole pillar keeping Ahrensbach standing. We cannot risk taking him away without a Zent wielding the Grutrissheit.”

“I'm not sure I understand...”

“We cannot return Ferdinand to Ehrenfest until we are able to divide Ahrensbach's land, create lesser duchies, and assign them aubs from among the other duchies' archducal families.”

Eglantine nodded. “Because there is no Grutrissheit to redraw the country's borders, it has fallen to the Sovereignty and the greater duchies to manage the territories that lost the civil war. In this case, if Ahrensbach were to collapse now, there would be no one to take its place or support its land. How do you think Ehrenfest would fare if, as its neighbor, it was burdened with such duties?”

Ehrenfest was already struggling with its own land after purging so many nobles; we didn't have the leeway to look after other duchies as well.

“Ahrensbach's crippling mana shortage was the only reason that Lady Detlinde's behavior has been overlooked,” Eglantine continued. “Lady Magdalena was rather furious after her visit the other day.”

Detlinde had apparently been rude enough to warrant her immediate execution. The mana shortage had made it necessary to spare her, but only for as long as she was needed. Her fate was sealed, and that realization shocked me like a plunge into ice-cold water.

“In that case, at the very least, promise me that Ferdinand won't be punished alongside her,” I said. “He is only in Ahrensbach to begin with, engaged to a woman he doesn't love and stuck

drinking one potion after another, because the king made him choose between that and murdering his own brother. Prince Anastasius, how would you feel if you were put in the same situation, forced to decide between killing Prince Sigiswald or marrying Lady Detlinde? In the case of the latter, how would you feel if you were then executed for her rudeness?"

Anastasius grimaced at the very thought; then, his gray eyes came to rest on me. "We will not be able to avoid punishing Ferdinand once he is married," he said provokingly. "If you wish to save him from this fate, obtain the Grutrissheit now, while their Starbinding is delayed."

I shuddered. It was clear from the look on his face that he wouldn't hesitate to exploit me for his own ends, but I refused to let that stop me. "Then would you return Ferdinand to Ehrenfest?"

"If you can foresee the problems that removing him from Ahrensbach would cause and can think of ways to solve them, then yes, as you will."

I won't let Ferdinand be executed alongside Lady Detlinde.

This was my chance to save him. It would require me to visit the shrines, obtain the Grutrissheit, and become Sigiswald's third wife... but those were sacrifices I was willing to make.

No matter what they demand of me, I'll use the Grutrissheit as my shield and save him.

"We're here," Anastasius said, bringing an end to our conversation before urging me forward. We were standing before a white shrine. I cleaned it, like with the others, and then touched the door. At once, I was transported inside.

"This one is for the Goddess of Wind..." I muttered to myself. "That slate is her divine color."

I could see a statue of a goddess holding a round shield in her left hand and a yellow slate in her right, standing among statues depicting her subordinates.

"O Schutzaria the Goddess of Wind, O Ordoschnelli the Goddess of Couriers, O Dregarnuhr the Goddess of Time, O Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom... Grant me the Book of Mestionora so that I might save Ferdinand. Praise be to the gods!"

Then, I took the already completed slate.

"Your prayers have reached me, and your worth has been acknowledged. I, Schutzaria, shall now grant you a word necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora."

As expected, it showed the same boilerplate text as the others, with the only difference being the goddess's word. The slate fused with the schtappe inside of me, then I repeated what was etched into my mind.

"Teidihinder."

And with that, I was outside again. I checked the door to make sure that it was locked, then returned to Eglantine and Anastasius. Alongside the black and blue lines in the sky was now a strip of yellow, and I could just about see a complex pattern forming.

"On to the next one," Anastasius instructed. "From this point onward, everyone ride your highbeasts."

It seemed that doing the entire journey on foot was getting to be a bit much for the others. We all rode down the next path—and our new mode of transport meant we reached the next shrine in no time at all. Again, I cleaned it and then went inside.

"Let's see... This one must be for the God of Life."

There was Ewigeliebe with his sword and subordinates, but this place was noticeably different from the others; the thirteen statues were positioned around a small shrine. Indeed, it was a shrine within a shrine!

Wait, is that the Earth shrine? I wondered. It seemed unlikely that Ewigeliebe and his subordinates would guard anything else so intently. *But why even bother recreating the bible this closely...?*

I wanted to sigh, but something compelled me to pray instead. I raised my arms and gazed upon Ewigeliebe the God of Life.

Oh! The slate isn't yet whole!

It was only half complete, which made sense, now that I thought about it; I seldom prayed to the God of Life. The only time I could remember doing so at the Royal Academy was when we were preparing for our bride-taking ditter match against Dunkelfelger. A white pillar had arisen when I was teaching Wilfried how to use the divine instrument.

"O Ewigeliebe the God of Life, O Schneeahst the God of Ice, O Schlaftraum the God of Dreams, O Cuococalura the God of Cooking..."

I wonder if praying to Cuococalura will net me various new recipes...

With that in mind, I continued to pray. It wasn't long before I started to feel a bunch of mana get sucked out of me, exactly as Eglantine had described. The slate reached completion just as it

became more difficult for me to maintain my stance.

A voice echoed in my head, *“Your prayers have reached me, and your worth has been acknowledged. I grant you permission to pray to my wife, Geduldh.”*

Wait, huh? What about the word for obtaining the Book of Mestionora?!

I was at a loss; this hadn't happened in the other shrines. Then, the door to the inner shrine began to open, revealing a statue of Geduldh the Goddess of Earth. The slate in her hand was complete, probably because of the Dedication Ritual we had performed here at the Royal Academy.

But, wait... how do I get it?

Statues of Ewigeliebe and his subordinates were still surrounding the Earth shrine, keeping me from going inside. I was pretty sure that even trying to approach would inspire the God of Life to cut me down with his sword—a terrifying thought, to be sure. I took and drank one of the rejuvenation potions at my hip as I considered what to do.

Can I at least get closer now that Ewigeliebe has accepted me?

And then it hit me—he had permitted me to pray and nothing more. At no point had he invited me to come closer. I gazed up at Ewigeliebe's statue in front of the shrine, and entreated the Goddess of Earth to help me.

“Please teach me how to obtain the slate! Praise be to Geduldh the Goddess of Earth!”

Mana flew out of my ring. Then, the red slate in Geduldh's hand shimmered, disappeared, and reappeared beside the white slate that Ewigeliebe was holding.

“Your prayers have reached Geduldh, and your worth has been acknowledged. She and I shall now grant you words necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora.”

So Ewigeliebe does the talking and the slate-giving... He really is protective.

It was a pretty bothersome gimmick, but I was impressed that the first Zent had gone to the trouble of encapsulating so much of what was written in the bible. As I mulled over how meticulous he must have been, the door to Geduldh's shrine closed again.

I took the white slate from the God of Life's hands. After such an unusual experience, I thought that it might say something unique, but the text was the same as always; only the given word

ever changed. The slate fused with the schtappe inside of me, and the new word spilled from my lips.

“Neigunsch.”

Next, I took and examined the red slate.

“This word alone, however, will not suffice; a Zent candidate must obtain the words of the other gods as well.”

The red slate also fused with my inner schtappe.

“Tolerakeit.”

Again, I was outside. It felt as though I’d spent much longer than usual in the shrine, since I’d needed to obtain two slates this time, but not a moment had actually passed. I gazed up at the sky—someone thanked me for washing the shrine in the meantime—and saw even more colors than before. What would happen after I obtained all of the slates? We were forging ahead into unknown territory, and it was honestly kind of terrifying.

“On to the next,” Anastasius said.

I shook my head, trying to dispel the fear building up inside of me. It was obvious by now that the royal family would never help me out of mere compassion; I needed something to bargain with them.

I’m not scared. I’m going to save Ferdinand.

As we continued along the side path, I couldn’t help but notice that the way ahead was getting steadily brighter.

“Just how many of these shrines are there?” Otilie murmured, her voice tinged with concern.

“Six,” Damuel replied without missing a beat. His swiftness earned him a strange look from Otilie, but he had confirmed their locations before our departure.

“There it is,” Anastasius said as the next shrine came into view. “Rozemyne, the usual.”

I washed the shrine, then went inside while pretending to check whether it was locked.

“This one’s for the Goddess of Light.”

There were twelve statues surrounding one that appeared to be wearing the crown of Light. In the center statue’s hand was a golden tablet that shone faintly and reminded me of the flames produced by contract magic.

“O Goddess of Light, O Gebordnung the Goddess of Order, O Unheilschneide the Goddess of Purification, O Liebeskhilfe the Goddess of Binding... I shall do whatever it takes to save Ferdinand,

so please offer me your guidance. Praise be to the gods!"

I cast my eyes upon the feystone slate, and...

"Yeah, that figures. Like the God of Darkness, she wants me to speak the name she gave me."

It arose in my mind without delay. I'd received the names of both supreme gods during one of my third-year practical lessons.

"Praise be to Versprechredi, the Goddess of Light."

The golden tablet in my hand sucked out some of my mana, and the text on its surface immediately changed.

"Your prayers have reached me, and your worth has been acknowledged. I shall now grant you a word necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora. This word alone, however, will not suffice; a Zent candidate must obtain the words of the other gods as well."

Then, as expected, the golden tablet fused with my internal schtappe. I spoke the word given to me by the Goddess of Light.

"Austrag."

Outside the shrine, I saw that Anastasius was touching the door as well, his brow furrowed in frustration and regret. He must have realized that I was looking at him, because he then adopted a more neutral expression.

"Done?" he asked me. I nodded in response, then he turned to his retainers with a dramatic flourish of his cape and said, "To the next one, then."

The next and the last.

There had been six large shrines on the map. We made our way to the final one, then I cleaned it and touched the door. Inside were another thirteen statues, the centermost of which was holding a staff in its right hand and a glittering green tablet in its left. That was enough for me to identify it as Flutrane, a goddess powerful enough to wash away Ewigeliebe at the start of spring using the water from the melted snow, but also kind enough to heal the wounded Geduldh.

"O Flutrane the Goddess of Water, O Verdrenna the Goddess of Thunder, O Heilschmerz the Goddess of Healing, O Verfuhrremeer the Goddess of Oceans... Please wash away the mountain of disasters weighing down on Ferdinand. Praise be to the gods!"

Even though I'd been riding in my Pandabus, I must have been tired from visiting all of the shrines with the royal family; I gave a somewhat sloppy prayer and then took the green tablet. To my surprise, the text on it was different than usual—perhaps because

this was the final shrine.

“Your prayers have reached me, and your worth has been acknowledged. I shall now grant you the last word necessary to obtain the Book of Mestionora. O great Zent candidate, who has obtained the words of the other gods as well, reach out and seize that which you seek.”

The next part of the process was very familiar: the green slate fused with my schtappe, then I spoke the new word that I’d received.

“Rombekur.”

Having now visited all of the shrines, I was given the much anticipated instruction to reach out and grab the Book of Mestionora. If what the Goddess of Water had said was true, then the Grutrissheit was right at hand.

Believe me, I want it, but... where exactly am I supposed to be reaching?!

Most suspicious of all were the lines of various colors that had been appearing in the sky as I went from shrine to shrine. I reached up as if to grab them.

C’mere, Book of Mestionora...

“What in the world are you doing?” Anastasius asked, narrowing his eyes at me. Nothing had happened.

Darn.

“Oh, I simply thought that I should pray in celebration now that the shrines are all clean.” It was a random excuse, but it was worth a try. So, with Anastasius, Eglantine, and their retainers watching me, I uttered a prayer and shot some mana up into the sky.

Still, nothing happened.

What am I supposed to do...? The gods could have been a little less ambiguous.

In any case, it was still too early to despair. The underground archive contained more documents about the shrines; perhaps they would give me an idea of what to do next.

But, well, I guess a rejuvenation potion comes first.

Cleaning the shrines had cost me quite a lot of mana, and our extended journey had drained my stamina, even though I was riding in my highbeast. I wanted to recover both before returning to the underground archive, so I went to grab the kindness-filled potion from my hip.

Ottillie’s expression changed to one of worry. “Lady Rozemyne,

was performing all of those waschens too much for your body to endure? Even if not, I strongly believe that you have traveled too far today...”

“Fear not,” Anastasius said, “that was the last shrine. We shall give Rozemyne some time to rest before we return to the library.”

I waved away Otilie’s concerns and smiled. “I will be fine once I can recover my mana.”

Oh...?

As I waited for the potion to take effect, the feeling that I was unable to control the mana overflowing within me suddenly began to fade. Little by little, I even started to compress my mana. I could now increase my quantity as easily as before my divine protections ritual.

I stared down at my hands, and tilted my head. *Could it be that my schtappe has grown...?*

“Is something the matter, Lady Rozemyne?” came Eglantine’s voice. She had noticed the look in my eyes and was proffering a sound-blocking magic tool. Anastasius adroitly noticed our intention to have a private conversation and came over, so Eglantine gave him a sound-blocker as well with a half-smile.

“It feels as though my schtappe has evolved,” I told them.

“What?” said Anastasius. “Explain.”

“It really is just a feeling—I cannot say whether it is true—but do you remember how the schtappe I obtained in my first year no longer suited me after I performed the ritual for obtaining divine protections?”

“I do,” Anastasius replied with a nod.

I opened and closed my hand. “The tablets one acquires in the shrines are very much like Divine Wills. After obtaining them all, I gained superior control over my mana.”

“So one can change one’s schtappe by obtaining the shrines’ tablets...?” Eglantine mused aloud, then beamed a radiant smile. “That means there might still be hope for Prince Sigiswald.”

It was much too early to rejoice, in my opinion; one had to collect feystones and continuously offer mana at small shrines to obtain the protections of the primary gods, and we didn’t even know whether obtaining them through a repeated ritual would permit one entry to the large shrines. He had a long way to go in either case.

“That is a long and uncertain road,” I said. “He would need to

pray at the small shrines, repeat his divine protections ritual to secure the protection of each primary god, then return to the Garden of Beginnings to improve his schtappe. I do not know whether that last step is even possible. Such matters are in the hands of the gods, so I can accept no responsibility for them.”

“Still, it is better than having no hope at all,” Eglantine replied. Her dazzling smile almost won me over, but I shook my head to drive away her false charms. “Lady Rozemyne?”

“We finished circling the shrines, but what now?” I asked, changing the subject.

“We will return to the underground archive,” Anastasius said. “Fourth bell is fast approaching. Everyone, on your highbeasts.”

I returned the sound-blocking magic tool and climbed into Lessy. Then, we all started making our way back to the library.

Ah!

Once we were in the air and above the trees, I saw that the colored lines connecting the shrines had formed a gigantic magic circle. We weren’t high up enough for me to see it all, and I couldn’t tell what it would do when activated, but it appeared to be covering the entire Royal Academy, with the central building quite appropriately at its center. The circle was probably focused on the Farthest Hall in particular.

I didn’t know what was happening, but I could tell that it was something extreme. My heart pounded unpleasantly in my chest.

Deeper into the Underground Archive

“I will need to inform Father that you have visited the shrines, and speak with him about what comes next,” Anastasius said. After bringing me back to the underground archive, he and Eglantine were going to have lunch and then attend an afternoon meeting.

“Prince Anastasius... were your actions here today done in secret, by chance?”

“I would not say that, but I am aware that I may have gotten a bit ahead of myself.”

Really? Just a bit?

Anastasius was trying to be expressionless, as was so common among nobles, but I could see the worry in his eyes. At the very least, he was much easier to read than Ferdinand.

Hm... He and Eglantine were really obstinate today. Could it be that something happened in the royal family?

I sighed at my own optimism—even now, I was trying to find a reason to trust them—and descended the stairs to the underground archive. Schwartz and Weiss were standing on either side of the transparent wall, beyond which Hildebrand and Magdalena were already at work. Hannelore must have been resting, because she was nowhere to be seen.

Our retainers were preparing lunch, but they stopped to welcome us when we arrived.

“We will be returning to the villa after speaking to Lady Magdalena,” Anastasius announced to his own retainers after reaching the bottom of the stairs. “There is much we will need to discuss with Father and my brother. Contact them at once.”

Anastasius’s and Eglantine’s retainers sent out ordonnanzes, started to pack some things, and told Magdalena’s retainers to summon their lady. I passed through them and headed to the rest area, where I found Hannelore. She set down her teacup and gave me a warm, healing smile.

“Welcome back, Lady Rozemyne. Have you finished cleaning all the shrines?”

“Indeed. I cleaned the last one just a moment ago.”

Weiss then hopped over, to my surprise; he seldom left his post by the transparent wall while we were visiting the archive.

“Weiss, what is the matter?” Hannelore asked, blinking her red eyes. “You moved so suddenly that I thought something had happened.”

The shumil offered no response. Instead, it came straight over to me, took my right hand, and said, “Follow me, milady.”

“Hm? Weiss?”

Before I could ask where, I realized that there was only one place the shumils would take me after I finished praying at all the shrines—the next location on the journey to obtain the Book of Mestionora. I swallowed hard, then saw Schwartz pushing Hildebrand out of the archive.

“Schwartz started telling me to leave all of a sudden,” Hildebrand griped. “What in the world is— Rozemyne?”

Everyone stared at the shumils for their strange behavior—and at me for being involved with it.

I guess I should keep going...

I turned to Anastasius, who gave me an affirming nod with a stiff expression. His gesture meant the royal family’s permission, so I went into the archive with Weiss. Schwartz took my left hand as soon as I entered.

“Transcribe, milady.”

I didn’t even need to ask what; the Book of Mestionora was no doubt awaiting me. Schwartz and Weiss guided me to one of the room’s white walls, and touched a recess in its surface. My mana was sucked into it; a magic circle sprang to life, like when we had unlocked the archive; and an opening appeared.

Well, looks like this is a path.

I turned to gauge the others’ reactions, only to realize that the transparent wall separating us had turned opaque. From within the archive, I couldn’t see any of them.

“Milady. This way.”

Together, Schwartz and Weiss pulled my arms and guided me through the newly formed, pure-white entrance. My heart was racing. Just knowing that the Book of Mestionora was ahead made my legs tremble in anticipation and my excitement swell.

I wonder what the book is like...

We soon arrived at a door marked with a complex, luminous

magic circle. It was clearly locked tight, which made me even more tense.

“Here, milady.”

At the shumils’ behest, I reached out and touched the magic circle. My hand was instantly knocked back, and a spark of what felt like electricity shot through me. It was just like what happened whenever someone touched Schwartz or Weiss without permission.

“Eep!” I cried, withdrawing my hand in surprise.

Schwartz and Weiss looked up at me.

“Not registered, milady.”

“Cannot enter.”

Before I could even process what had just happened, the two shumils rejected my entry. “Registered with what?” I asked in a daze.

“The royal family.”

Their simple response made the blood drain from my face. The archive containing the Grutrissheit could only be entered by those with royal blood—Ferdinand had told me that already. He had said that my commoner origins would prevent me from ever becoming queen, but after being allowed into the shrines and easily obtaining the slates of each element, some part of me had remained stubbornly optimistic. In hindsight, it was obvious that an archive containing something so important would vet entrants with a magic-enforced blood checker.

What should I do...?

I needed to obtain the Grutrissheit this year; otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to save Ferdinand. It had been the best option available to me, and the path ahead suddenly seemed much bleaker.

It would take me three years to be registered as a royal...

To prevent skilled archduke candidates from being taken by force, archduke candidates were forbidden from moving to the Sovereignty outside of marriage. In other words, I would only be able to enter the royal family by marrying Sigiswald—and our Starbind Ceremony would need to wait until after I came of age. That was three years away at the absolute least, which was completely useless; Ferdinand was getting married *next year*.

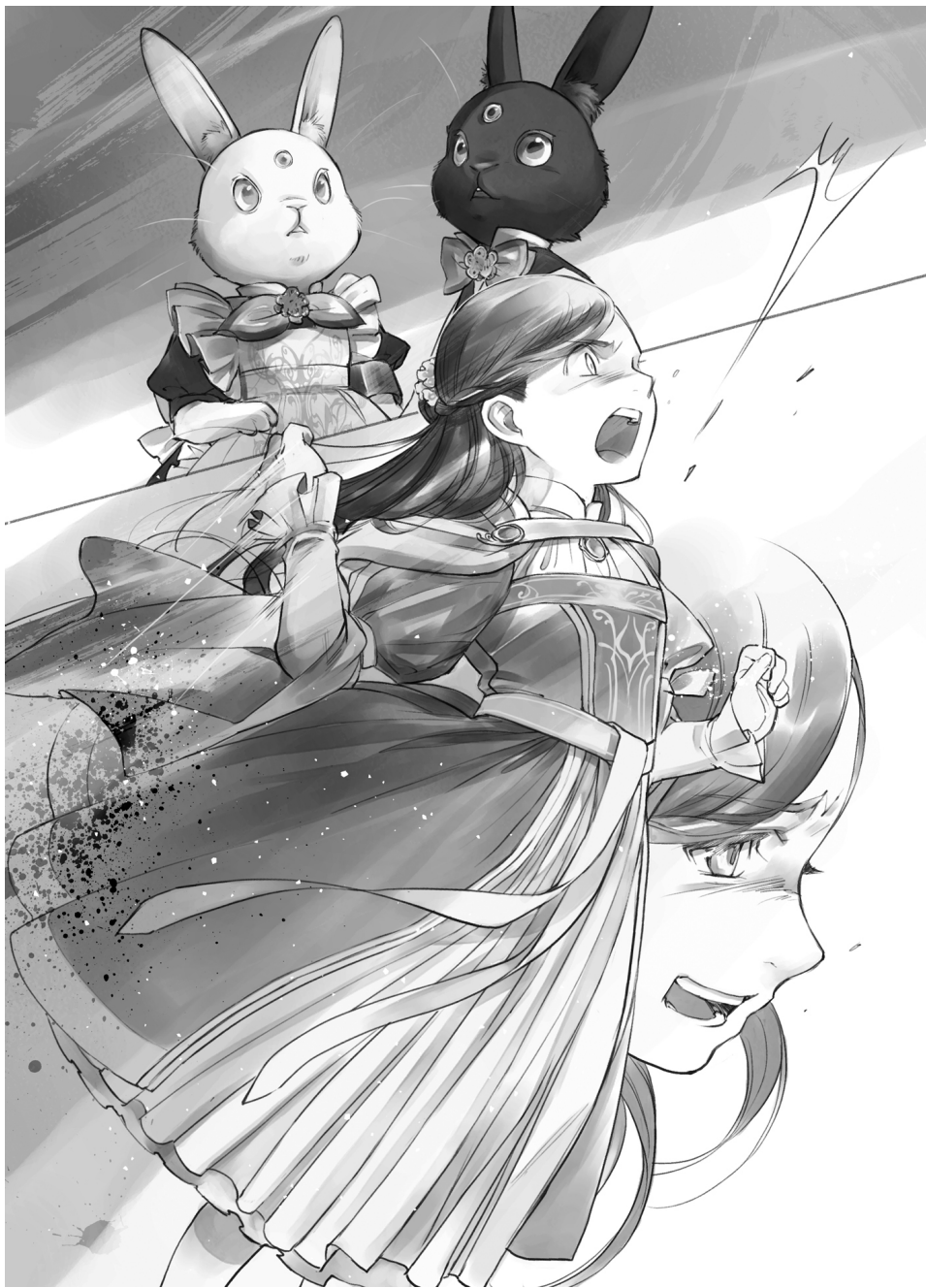
“Open...” I mumbled, then slapped the door. My hand was blasted away again, this time with even greater force. I gazed from my hand to the magic circle—the sparks had made my fingers go

numb—then struck the entrance again.

“Open.”

Again, I was repelled, and with even more force. My hand throbbed, and a storm of emotions swirled in my chest: frustration that the Grutrissheit was just out of reach, despair that I wasn't able to save Ferdinand, outrage that the royal-only magic circle kept rejecting me... They all made me sick.

“LET ME IN!”



Letting my emotions run wild, I squeezed my numb hand into a fist and banged on the entrance as hard as I could. Sparks flew as my destructive mana clashed with the mana protecting the door. There came a sudden *pop* from my wrist, then another. The magic circle's counterattacks were destroying my charms from Ferdinand, one by one, which snapped me out of my rage. In a panic, I pulled my hand away.

"Milady is dangerous."

"Must be eliminated."

After my little outburst, Schwartz and Weiss must have identified me as a threat; the feystones on their foreheads lit up as they prepared to attack me.

I couldn't let any more of the charms given to me be destroyed, so I muttered, "I'm going..." and started to head back, my shoulders slumped. Schwartz and Weiss followed after me, still on guard and ready to attack.

Even upon reentering the archive, the entrance remained opaque. I collapsed upon it and looked down at my hand, which was stinging and tingling. The part of my fist that had struck the circle was covered in red and black splotches, as though it had gotten seriously burned. Not even Ferdinand's charms had protected me fully.

"It hurts..." I murmured.

As I continued to stare down at my wounds, Schwartz and Weiss closed the path we had opened, then hopped over and stood in front of the archive door. Weiss then passed through, at which point the entrance became transparent again. I could see everyone waiting with bated breath.

"Rozemyne!" Hildebrand exclaimed, but Anastasius stopped him from running over to me. He told everyone else to stand back, then entered alone.

"Rozemyne, did you...?"

"I wasn't able to. The farthest door can only be opened by those registered as royalty."

"I see..." Anastasius muttered, sounding regretful. He then caught sight of my hand and froze. "What happened to you?"

"The magic circle rejected me. Violently."

"I never thought this would happen... Leave the archive and be

healed at once.”

I grabbed his hand and shook my head. “What’s going to happen to Ferdinand? A year won’t be enough time for me to obtain the Grutrissheit. What should I do...?”

“Rozemyne, calm down. Your mana...”

His instruction was pointless; it was never that simple. I shot Anastasius a hard glare and said, “You intend to punish Ferdinand alongside Lady Detlinde, do you not? Would you be able to ‘calm down’ if someone told you they were going to execute Lady Eglantine or your family entirely because of Lady Detlinde’s actions?!”

Anastasius gritted his teeth with a pained expression, then blinked in confusion. “How is that an appropriate comparison? You aren’t married or engaged to Ferdinand, nor is he a member of your family.”

“He was my guardian since before I was baptized, as well as my mentor and my doctor; he’s equivalent to family. He counts among those I need to protect more than anyone or anything else, so why wouldn’t I worry about him? How *dare* you threaten to execute him for the crimes of a woman he never wanted to marry to begin with—especially when he’s been downing one potion after another to keep Ahrensbach afloat. Who wouldn’t be furious when someone they care about is being treated so abhorrently?!”

The moment I got emotional, the charms covering my body began to light up. They each filled with mana and started to shine.

Oh no. At this rate, I’m going to Crush a prince...

That realization immediately cooled my head. I took deep breaths, and compressed the mana that was swelling inside of me. The process was much easier than I was used to, and the charms dimmed before any of my mana could leak out—my schtappe really had evolved.

Anastasius knit his brow. “‘Equivalent to family,’ hm...? I had hoped to light a fire under you—to increase your motivation to obtain the Grutrissheit—but it would appear that I crossed some lines.” He sighed, then plaintively began to cast healing magic on me. “It is customary for married couples to be punished together, but Detlinde will only be punished *after* the situation in Ahrensbach has stabilized—in other words, when the royal family obtains the Grutrissheit, or when Hildebrand and Letizia come of age and marry. We will overlook you helping Ferdinand maneuver to a

position where he can protect himself. Such an aspiration is still possible to achieve.”

I merely cocked my head at the prince, unsure what to say. It seemed that Ferdinand wasn’t in immediate danger after all.

Anastasius gave a self-deprecating smile. “I truly must have lost myself to urgency... I acted too carelessly and completely forgot that you often do not share the common sense of most nobles. Although I spoke in a fairly provocative way to motivate you, what I said just now is so glaringly obvious that I am sure Ferdinand understands it already.”

Ferdinand understands that he’s going to be punished by association...?

I suddenly remembered our meeting with Eglantine after Detlinde’s dedication whirl; Ferdinand had used a recording to prove that he had tried to stop his stubborn fiancée. Still, I was against him needing to prove his innocence simply because he was engaged to a troublemaker.

“Ferdinand will most likely have Ahrensbach under his thumb within the next half year,” Anastasius continued. “Rather than fret about him, you would do well to worry about yourself.”

“About myself...?” I repeated. Was there anything I needed to be concerned about other than Ferdinand and Ehrenfest?

“I retract my earlier statement that my elder brother will take you as his third wife; if only a member of the royal family can obtain the Grutrissheit, then the danger you’re in is vastly diminished.” He gave a weary sigh, then peered down at me with a look of partial concern and added, “As is your potential value to us.”

“Um, what? The danger I’m in? Potential value?”

“We have already spoken to Aub Ehrenfest regarding these matters. Has he told you nothing?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Then ask *him* for the details,” Anastasius said, shaking his head in disbelief. It seemed that Sylvester and I were experiencing a bit of a communication failure. “If you *had* managed to obtain the Grutrissheit, whether for yourself or to give to my brother, we would have needed to secure you by any means necessary. But if you aren’t qualified to be a Zent candidate after all, we will need to rethink matters.”

He then escorted me out of the archive, and delivered me to my

retainers. “I apologize that we made you clean all the shrines today. And, as a warning... you would do well to keep a few more guards around you.”

On that note, Anastasius went off to have lunch, with Eglantine accompanying him. As soon as they were gone, my retainers surrounded me.

“Lady Rozemyne, what in the world happened...?”

“Umm... How did it look to all of you?” I asked.

As it turned out, the barrier had turned white and opaque as soon as Weiss and I went into the archive. My retainers hadn’t been able to pass through, nor had the royals who had managed to enter before.

“Tell us—what did you do behind the white wall, Lady Rozemyne?” Hannelore asked me. I could tell that my retainers wanted to ask the same question.

Unsure how to respond, I turned to Magdalena. Her lips curled, and she discreetly shook her head, indicating that this was too important for me to discuss.

I smiled and said, “Nothing at all. I was unqualified.”

“In what way?” Hildebrand asked, curious. “And what did you need qualifications for in the first place?”

Eglantine had said that she didn’t want unnecessary conflict with the top-ranking duchies, so I refused to answer, and instead suggested that he ask Anastasius. I didn’t want to say anything unnecessary that might make me even more involved with the royals, so I would let them decide how to respond to Hildebrand.

This morning alone had served as an agonizing demonstration of why Sylvester and Ferdinand desperately wanted me to avoid getting involved with the royal family and top-ranking duchies: no matter how well we seemed to mesh, we were friends in name alone. They had so much more power than I did, meaning I would need to accept any unreasonable “requests” they made of me, and our priorities would seldom align. My only options to avoid their demands were to get powerful enough to refuse them, or do my best to stay out of their sight.

“The events of this morning have left me famished,” I said to Otilie, and turned away from Hildebrand. “Let us have lunch.”

“As you will, Lady Rozemyne,” she replied. “Fourth bell just chimed, so it makes sense that you are hungry. Cornelius, prepare a seat for her.”

Cornelius had been peering down at me, his brow furrowed in concern, but he wasted no time carrying out his duty. He offered me his hand, which I took, and together we went over to my seat.

“Wait a moment, Rozemyne,” Hildebrand said. “I—”

“Dear, do not trouble Lady Rozemyne with any more questions,” Magdalena interjected.

At that, everyone returned to their preparations—though I could tell they were still worried about me. The attendants poured tea, while the guards arranged themselves around their charge’s seat. Hildebrand went off with Magdalena, though he kept shooting me troubled glances.

After an awkward lunch spent mostly in silence—nobody had wanted to say anything—I dedicated my afternoon to translating. As I worked on a particular slate, I suddenly recalled my time with Dunkelfelger’s history book.

How was it that a king once came from Dunkelfelger?

If one needed to be registered as a royal to obtain the Grutrisheit, then how had such a thing been possible? The book was a very ancient record, so it hadn’t offered an explanation, but it implied the existence of some other way to become king. Or perhaps someone from a subsequent generation had put that blood-checking magic circle in place to prevent kings arising from duchies other than their own...

I can’t believe they denied me my best method.

Anastasius had said that it would be a very long time before Detlinde was punished and that Ferdinand was no doubt enacting a plan to save himself, but I didn’t know whether he was telling the truth. I wanted to contact Ferdinand about the danger and make sure he was safe at the very least, but I had firmly been told not to worry about him.

“Um, Lady Rozemyne...” Hannelore glanced around very hesitantly and then continued in a quiet voice, “Your sleeve...”

I glanced down and realized that my sleeve was stained with blood; the magic circle’s counterattacks had done more than just scorch me.

“I thank you ever so much for your concern, Lady Hannelore, but Prince Anastasius has already healed my wounds. I am quite fine.”

“Pardon? Prince Anastasius used healing magic on you?”

I nodded, watching her quizzically. Anastasius had entered the archive and then refused to allow anyone else to join us, so who else could have treated me?

Upon seeing my confusion, Hannelore carefully elaborated. “Under normal circumstances, the royal family would never cast healing on another...” They needed to dedicate their mana to Yurgenschmidt, so the very idea was apparently unthinkable. Healing my wounds had been Anastasius’s indirect way of apologizing to me, since his status prevented him from admitting fault or ending up in my debt.

How was I supposed to figure that out? It won’t make much of a difference, anyway—if Ferdinand ends up being punished because of Detlinde, I’ll never forgive Anastasius, no matter how much he apologizes.

“Time to go, Rozemyne,” Sylvester said. The past few days must have made him realize that simply calling my name wasn’t enough, because he yanked the slate away from me without a moment’s hesitation.

I put away my writing tools, handed today’s work to Magdalena, then left the library with Sylvester.

“Am I in danger?” I asked as we made our way back to the dormitory. “Prince Anastasius said there are things you haven’t told me.”

“We’ll discuss that later,” Sylvester replied with a grimace, then smiled at me and said, “You two must have had quite the conversation for him to have brought that up.”

“We’ll discuss that later.”

We looked at each other, then let out heavy sighs. It seemed that Sylvester had gotten wrapped up in a lot of nasty business too.

“You know, my dear adoptive father... today’s events have made me painfully aware of why everyone wanted me to stay away from the royal family.”

Sylvester regarded me with a thoroughly drained expression. “Hah. Took you this long to understand, did it? Hate to break it to you, but you should have been quicker on the uptake. It’s already too late.”

Wait, what do you mean by that?!

Letters and a Discussion

Sylvester and I spent the rest of our journey back to the dormitory conversing with each other and asking our retainers to schedule a meeting for after dinner. Upon our return, Lieseleta rushed over to me.

“Welcome back. Professor Hirschur is waiting for you both in the common room.”

“Professor Hirschur?”

Sylvester and I exchanged looks, then went into the common room. Hirschur immediately stood out to us; in a room full of desperately busy adults darting here and there in preparation for the coming days, she was casually standing by the bookshelf, reading.

“Hirschur?!” Sylvester exclaimed. “What are you doing here?!”

“Aub Ehrenfest, Lady Rozemyne,” she greeted us, though her eyes remained glued to her book. Only after she had returned it to its rightful place did she finally look up at us. “Back at last, I see. I come with a letter from Ferdinand.”

“From Ferdinand...?” I repeated. “But his Starbind Ceremony was delayed. Do you mean to say that he came to the Royal Academy anyway?”

“That very same delay means he is still a citizen of Ehrenfest. As a result, while he cannot attend the conference, I would imagine there is little stopping him from visiting the dormitory. One of his attendants gave this to me.”

That reminded me—Ferdinand had sat out an Archduke Conference in the past, only to be summoned to the Royal Academy anyway. Perhaps that had happened again.

Hirschur pointed at a magic box sitting nearby and said, “Please open it at once, Aub Ehrenfest.” It looked much too large for a simple letter, but the advantage was that only the archduke could open it. “I’m told that Ferdinand put some research documents inside as well, to ensure that I would get it here swiftly. A rather cheeky move, wouldn’t you agree?”

"Would you not have neglected to deliver it until next winter otherwise?" I asked. "He simply knows you too well, Professor Hirschur."

"Obviously."

Don't look so proud about that!

Sylvester opened the box with a wry smile, and Hirschur pounced at the documents inside. Once she had them in her hands, she began to skim them with a look of complete satisfaction.

"What are they about?" I asked.

"The library's magic tools. It would seem that they can be made more easily by splitting the functions of organizing and searching for documents. Still, the creation process is rather difficult, and it requires high-quality materials..."

Magic tools that can organize and search for documents? Wait, does that mean I can put simplified versions of Schwartz and Weiss in my library?!

The two shumils were also responsible for guiding royals to the Grutrissheit, but that part wouldn't be of any use to me.

"Professor Hirschur, let me see them too!" I cried. "You don't care about organizing documents, do you?" I jumped up and down, trying to at least glimpse the research, but Hirschur raised it much higher than I could reach.

"I come first, Lady Rozemyne. These tools will be of much more use to me, as my documents will remain unorganized without them."

Guh... She's right!

I recalled the state of Hirschur's laboratory and promptly conceded. She needed an organizing magic tool more than anyone.

"I expect to have completed the finishing touches by the start of the next academic term," Hirschur informed me. "You may come to my laboratory then, if you are interested."

"You expect me to wait until winter...? I want to read them now."

"You would do well to remember that you are supposed to be in Ehrenfest. Wait for the proper time and place."

As everyone kept reminding me, I didn't want to be seen wandering around the Royal Academy. I was here purely to assist the royal family, so visiting the scholar building or staying in Hirschur's laboratory for my own enjoyment were completely out of the question.

Ngh... But my magic tools...

No matter what I told myself, the thought of my very own Schwartz and Weiss was to die for. I started to contemplate how to get my hands on their production method, only for Hirschur to look down at me and chuckle.

“I shall write up a list of the necessary ingredients and deliver it to the dormitory. Perhaps you can hole up in my laboratory this winter to brew with them.”

“Yes!” I declared, my fists clenched in determination. But before I could say much else, Sylvester thwacked me on the head with some paper.

“Rozemyne, this one is for you,” he said, holding out a letter from the box. I went to take it from him, then paused; what if there was invisible ink on it? Nothing had happened when he slapped it against my head, so there was probably nothing to worry about.

I can take it, right? Ferdinand wouldn't carelessly use shining ink on a letter he was going to package with other correspondence... right?

My hand trembled a little as I reached out to accept the letter. Sylvester must have noticed, because he gave me a suspicious look and said, “What’s gotten into you?” as he handed it over.

“Well, um... will I be allowed to write him back?” I asked while checking the letter for shining ink. “Is it not wrong of me to worry about or contact him?”

Sylvester seemed troubled all of a sudden. “You can respond to him, yes. I’m sure he’s going to give me a lot to think about, so let’s delay our meeting until tomorrow.” He gave the correspondence addressed to him to one of his scholars, then turned his attention to the eccentric professor. “Good work, Hirschur. You can eat dinner with us today.”

“I appreciate the offer,” she replied, “but I must return to my laboratory at once.”

“I see. Well, I won’t stop you.”

After freeing Hirschur with a breezy wave, Sylvester headed off to his room. I then did the same, firmly holding my letter from Ferdinand.

After eating dinner and bathing, I went into my hidden room. Paper and regular ink had already been prepared for me to write my response, but I didn’t have any shining ink—as expected, since I hadn’t anticipated needing to write a letter to Ferdinand during the

Archduke Conference.

“There’s so much I want to mention, like the silver cloth and the chance that he might be punished by association... but anything I write will end up being checked, so I need to keep it all innocuous. Well, I’m sure Sylvester will cover all of the important parts.”

I sighed and opened the letter, which was prefaced with a warning: *“I wrote this while everyone was absent for the Archduke Conference and got Eckhart to include it with my letters to Sylvester. Pen your response under the assumption that it will be checked.”* He was evidently in a position where he could write but not read freely.

You know, Ferdinand, even I understand that my letters to you will undergo inspection.

It was obvious that anything I wrote would be carefully examined not just by Ahrensbach but by Sylvester as well. Dissatisfied to have been thrust into such an annoying scenario, I started reading the letter written in a familiar hand. The first lines of the first paragraph were a scolding.

“So, you have stopped writing to me. How am I to interpret that? You were the one who demanded this correspondence in the first place, as a way to confirm that I am well.”

Ngh... I’m sorry.

I hadn’t sent Ferdinand a letter since Sylvester told me to cease my worrying and stop contacting him so often. He was well within his rights to complain.

“There’s so much I want to tell you!” I grumbled, my lips pursed. I would need to settle for what Sylvester had told me, though, so I put pen to paper and wrote what could essentially be summarized as “I need to be more careful now that I actually look my age.”

That alone wasn’t enough to vent all of my frustrations, though; while I was at it, I mentioned that I was being urged to show the same concern for Wilfried that I’d shown Ferdinand when he was here, and that Wilfried was far from pleased with the results. Nobody here would listen to my complaints, so just being able to write them down was surprisingly therapeutic.

“Getting all that off my chest has really calmed me down. Of course, I can’t actually send this; Ahrensbach would learn far too much about Ehrenfest’s internal affairs.”

I folded up my sheet of complaints, then started a new letter

with my one-line summary and an additional note that I was indeed growing at an impressive rate. That settled that.

I continued reading my letter from Ferdinand. In it, he explained that the nobles of Ahrensbach had also been made to participate in Spring Prayer, and that he had gathered plenty of ingredients in the process. Letizia had apparently refused the kindness-infused potions that Sergius had delivered to her, as she “did not yet need potions of such a high quality.”

My stamina had once been so poor that I would end up immobilized in the blink of an eye, but Letizia could get by on normal rejuvenation potions. She had ended up deprived of mana, sure, but she hadn’t collapsed once during Spring Prayer. Ferdinand wrote that he had again been surprised to remember how sickly I was compared to a normal child.

“Well, I’m a lot healthier now than I was when you were around. I ended up bedridden a mere three times this past Spring Prayer, and I recovered after just two days of rest. How about that?!”

I scribbled my response, filled with indignation, but the truth of the matter was that being compared to Letizia depressed me. It felt like I was still so far away from being normal.

You just need to improve, Rozemyne. Bit by bit.

I returned my attention to the letter.

“Alongside this letter are some verinur flowers I obtained while circling Ahrensbach for Spring Prayer. They are an ideal ingredient for making charms. I cannot do much with them myself, owing to my lack of a workshop, but I expect you are now capable enough to brew with them on your own.”

So that was why the correspondence had come in such a large box—he had sent us some materials as well. A good number of my charms had just broken, so it was good timing.

Not just good, actually—perfect. Classic Ferdinand.

I read a section describing the ideal charms to make with the verinur flowers, then continued.

“In return, there are a few things I must ask you to prepare before next year’s Archduke Conference. First, a minimum of three hundred sheets of maximal-quality fey paper. Ehrenfest and Drewanchel published research on improving such paper, did they not? Use that to your advantage. From my workshop, I also require some geschtepferd leather, as well as sonnenschlag and regisch feystones, also of maximal

quality.”

Hold on a second. How is that a fair trade for a few measly flowers?!

I didn't know what Ferdinand intended to do with such materials, but his demands seemed pretty unreasonable. I would probably be able to find everything but the fey paper in the workshop he had given me, but still—this was a big ask.

Maximal-quality fey paper, hm?

A minimum of three hundred sheets meant that not even our supply of trombe paper would suffice. The noble children entering the orphanage this year had made me hesitant to produce more.

Maybe I should ask Brigitte after I get back to Ehrenfest...

Our research into new uses for Illgner's fey paper had resulted in a joint research project with Drewanchel, and it was possible that the province had invented another kind of paper in the meantime. If not, I would just need to have the children harvest trombes—without telling the nobles, of course.

Ferdinand was asking a lot of me, but I wrote that I would do my best to prepare everything. As I read on, however, his list of demands grew longer. He also wanted us to bring various items with us when we attended Aub Ahrensbach's funeral next summer, including some luggage and more food. It was starting to feel like he was using me as a very convenient tool.

Hmph. I'm busy too, you know!

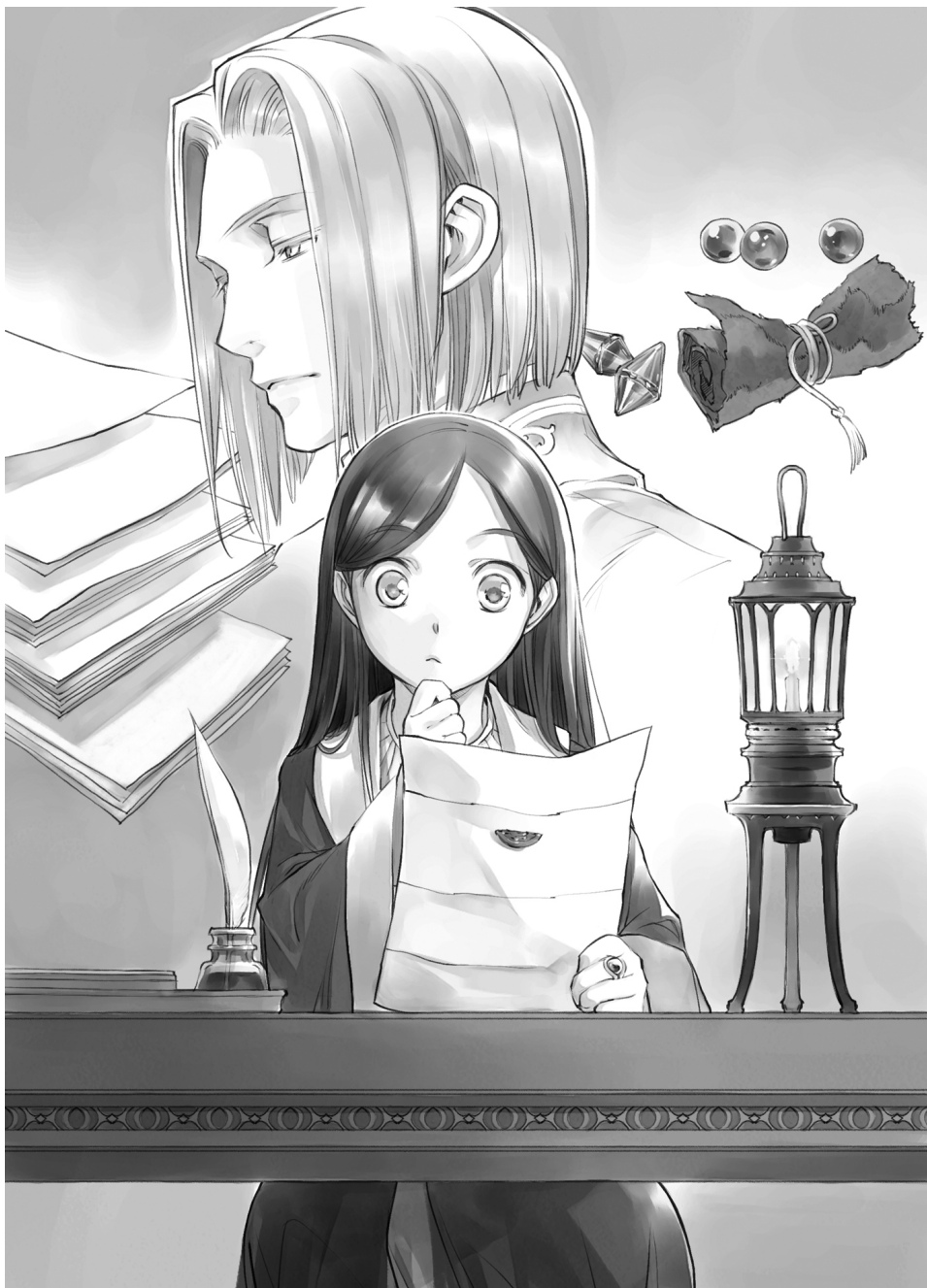
The letter continued, *“I do not like having to ask so much of you, so I intend to prepare some fish for you in return. I will accept any requests.”*

“Yippee!” I shouted. “I'll get your paper and meals ready in an instant! Praise be to the gods!”

I made a note to tell Sylvester to send over the luggage that Ferdinand needed, then started humming to myself as I wrote down the fish I wanted to eat.

“I don't want taunadel or any other poisonous fish, but I *do* want plenty of spresch; that spresch-ball soup we had was delicious. I also want fish that even commoner chefs will be able to skin. So... some of that... and a few of these... Done.”

I grinned at my response, excited to have fish again after such a long time. Now I was really looking forward to summer. Such enthusiasm was tragically short-lived, however; my mood took a nosedive when I read the next part of the letter.



“What in the world drove you to revive an ancient practice during the Starbind Ceremony?”

I didn't know much about the goings-on of the Archduke Conference; Hartmut and Clarissa only ever reported that they were busy. According to Ferdinand, however, the Sovereign temple and most duchies other than Ehrenfest were petitioning the royal family to have my engagement to Wilfried canceled. They wanted me to join the Sovereign temple as its new High Bishop and then teach Yurgenschmidt how to perform religious ceremonies in accordance with the ancient traditions. I couldn't be sent to other duchies to do so while serving as the High Bishop in Ehrenfest, but such restrictions wouldn't be applicable in the Sovereign temple.

It had now been proven that there was a positive correlation between the amount one prayed and the number of divine protections one obtained, so reviving the old rituals and spreading the correct way to perform them would increase the mana average all across Yurgenschmidt. The Sovereign temple was also proclaiming that bringing back the old rituals would allow a true Zent to be chosen.

Ahrensbach already had a Zent candidate, so it was in fervent support of the Sovereign temple's efforts. Georgine was actively asserting that, by having Ferdinand and the other nobles participate in ceremonies, they would gain more divine protections, and their harvest would increase. She was also riling the archducal couples of other duchies by saying things like “It is unjust for Ehrenfest to monopolize such valuable knowledge” and “The entire country would benefit from Lady Rozemyne becoming the Sovereign High Bishop.”

Ferdinand wasn't yet married to Detlinde, meaning he couldn't participate in the Archduke Conference or stop Georgine from speaking her mind during tea parties and meals. He could hear reports from scholars and attendants who were present, then complain to Georgine about her actions, but she would shut him down by saying that she was only telling the truth.

“As the Lanzenave princess has been refused, I expect negotiations with them to be unpleasant once we return to Ahrensbach. That is still preferable to having accepted her, but...”

Ferdinand would need to be involved with said negotiations,

but he already seemed to be mentally exhausted. He had decided to leave Justus in Ahrensbach and was spending the Archduke Conference trying to keep Georgine's attention away from her duchy.

As for Detlinde, she had apparently been fuming after an encounter with "a tremendously rude woman" in the Royal Academy's library. She was in a much better mood now, though; the others in her duchy had managed to raise her spirits by saying that the revival of the old ceremonies might lead to her being chosen as the next Zent. It seemed to me that they were just humoring her to prevent any more hysterical tantrums before their foundation was fully dyed. None of them intended to actually stop her.

Oof... Ahrensbach is going crazy.

In response to the duchies that were siding with Georgine, Ehrenfest had attempted to protest. "How would you fare if one of *your* archduke candidates were taken by the Sovereign temple?" we had said. "In the first place, such an act is forbidden." Unfortunately for us, we were fighting a losing battle; Ehrenfest and Frenbeltag had already demonstrated that a duchy could improve its harvest by having nobles with plentiful mana take part in its religious ceremonies, and considering that most duchies were in dire straits, having to wrestle with mana shortages and worsening crop yields, Ferdinand thought that we were basically doomed. Even if we forestalled them now, we were guaranteed to fail next year.

"If you were to become the Sovereign High Bishop, it would allow you to restrain the royal family and the Sovereign temple, spread the traditional way of performing ceremonies, and assist other duchies. It would also free King Trauerqual from his current burden, if your efforts led to the establishment of a Zent by proper means."

Ehrenfest and I would suffer, but nobody else. That was why everyone was searching for ways to get me into the Sovereign temple.

"As you were brought into the archducal family through adoption, if you were disowned and reduced to the status of an archnoble, then it would be possible for you to move to the Sovereignty. You, Sylvester, and Karstedt would all need to agree, though. No matter how much pressure the royal family might put on you, they cannot use a royal decree to cancel your adoption."

One thing that a royal decree could accomplish was canceling

my engagement to Wilfried. The king would simply need to retract his approval, which would return us to the time when everyone had been fighting for my hand in marriage, no matter what Sylvester tried to say or do.

“In general, do not refuse to assist the royal family—doing so will only harm Ehrenfest’s reputation further. Now that we are being treated as though we were on the winning side of the civil war, we will surely face the envy of the losing duchies. At the same time, however, the victorious duchies will seek your assistance. Expect to be summoned and consulted, as I once was. And, should you receive such a request, do not refuse; instead, buy time. You must endure for at least a year, though do try to hold out for even longer.”

Ferdinand then gave me a response for if the royal family tried to force my hand: I was already doing so much for them, so why would I agree to be reduced to an archnoble? He also advised me to tell fans of Elvira’s stories that I was so deeply in love with Wilfried that I wanted to prevent our engagement from being canceled under any circumstances.

I appreciate the warning and advice, but... I don’t think I could pretend to be in love with Wilfried. I’ve never been in love with anyone. Hmm...

Even as I climbed into bed that night, I continued to ponder my situation. So much had happened... which was probably why I woke up the next morning with a fever.

“You *did* spend all of yesterday morning outside,” Ottilie said while preparing some rejuvenation potions for me. “At least today is Earthday—you can rest as usual without fear of what others might think. The aub has said that your discussion can wait until you have recovered.”

Seeing me bedridden had given Clarissa a minor panic attack. Lieseleta was consoling her by saying that this was a regular occurrence for me.

“Um, Clarissa... do you think I will end up in the Sovereign temple?” I asked.

“Ehrenfest cannot afford to lose you, Lady Rozemyne. But fear not!” She gave her chest a mighty thump. “Hartmut and I will protect you!”

I appreciated her enthusiasm, but Ferdinand had said that we were basically doomed. Sylvester must have been under an enormous amount of pressure. I doubted he would ever admit it,

though; he always acted tough and tried to hide the weirdest things from me. That was probably what Anastasius had meant yesterday.

“As someone from another duchy, what do you believe Ehrenfest should do?” I prompted. “If the Sovereign temple wanted someone other than me, what would you think?”

Clarissa’s expression flattened; then she gave me a look of complete seriousness. “I would think it was the best opportunity we would ever have to earn favor with the royal family and other duchies. By complying with the Sovereign temple, Ehrenfest would prove that it deserves its place among the victorious. We would need to negotiate a few terms—how long the arrangement would last, the order in which the duchies would be taught, and so on—but we would never have another opportunity to gain so much from the loss of a single archduke candidate.”

She gave me a troubled smile. “On the other hand, if we monopolize you, it will earn us the jealousy and ire of every other duchy. Because of my familiarity with Ehrenfest’s internal situation, I understand why we cannot afford to lose you... but I would not have been as sympathetic back when I was living in Dunkelfelger. I would have been shocked to see Ehrenfest being so self-centered, especially when there must be *hordes* of people eager to watch the Saint of Ehrenfest perform her miracles!”

That was a shame; Clarissa had come across as such a competent scholar before those last few words. In any case, I now had a better idea of how the other duchies viewed our situation. Sylvester had doubtless been going through hell while I was translating in the archive, becoming a Zent candidate, and getting rejected for not being a royal.

By dinnertime, my fever had gone down, so I went into one of the dormitory’s meeting rooms to speak with Sylvester. Florencia was with him, and she welcomed me with a smile.

“It is good to see that your fever has gone down.”

“Ferdinand told me what has been happening during this year’s conference,” I noted, then took out his letter to me and my response. Sylvester read them both before returning the former and giving the latter to one of his scholars.

“In any case,” he said with a grin, “I don’t intend to cancel your engagement or send you to the Sovereignty.”

Florencia looked at us both, clearly worried. “Has the royal

family said anything?”

“They want me to hand over Rozemyne, since it’ll repair their relationship with the Sovereign temple and grant the other duchies’ wishes. In their words, ‘a deeper understanding of religious ceremonies will benefit the entire country.’ That doesn’t matter, though; I’m turning them down.”

Sylvester had argued that the idea was unthinkable when most nobles still aggressively looked down on the country’s temples. Plus, the royal family had promised that my involvement in the Archduke Conference’s Starbind Ceremony would be a onetime thing and that it would solidify Prince Sigiswald as the next Zent; demanding that I now join the Sovereign temple was nothing short of outrageous.

Sylvester had gone on to say that the royal family’s reason for wanting my assistance—the strength of my mana—was also why Ehrenfest considered me such a crucial pillar of support. “It would be unacceptable if both Ferdinand and Rozemyne were stolen from us to support other lands,” he had said. “Besides, is it not against the law to move archduke candidates to the Sovereignty?”

“The Zent accepted my argument,” Sylvester continued. “I’m guessing he only asked on the off chance that I might concede, since pretty much every single duchy is pushing for it. The thing is...” He crossed his arms, then told us the most important part of all: Sigiswald was in agreement with the other duchies.

The first prince had apparently said that this was Ehrenfest’s only chance to earn favor from all of the other duchies, and that Yurgenschmidt’s highest priorities were performing religious ceremonies, obtaining divine protections, and making everyone’s mana more efficient. He was pushing for me to join the Sovereign temple.

Wait, what? When did this exchange take place, exactly? Does neither Trauerqual nor Sigiswald know that I’m a Zent candidate now?

Everything that Sylvester was saying had to do with making me the Sovereign High Bishop; Anastasius seemed to be the only person thinking about securing me as a Zent candidate. We had only visited the shrines yesterday, so perhaps Trauerqual and the others in the royal family were simply unaware, but Eglantine and Anastasius had presumably told them all about it.

Or, what, have they not told them anything at all...?

Anastasius hadn’t been confident in my status as a Zent candidate before he accompanied me to the shrines. He had told me

afterward that he was acting alone, and if Eglantine was keeping the purpose of the shrines a secret to avoid starting chaos, then Magdalena wouldn't have known either.

She must have noticed all of that hullabaloo in the underground archive, but again, that only happened yesterday... Maybe the Zent is learning what happened as we speak.

I was contemplating how much information was being shared among the royal family when I saw Sylvester shrug. "I got a letter of invitation this morning," he remarked. "The royal family summoned me for a meeting two days from now. The Zent still seems to be on my side, so I'm planning to turtle up and wait for the Archduke Conference to end. No matter what anyone says, the only way an archduke candidate can be moved to the Sovereignty is through marriage."

Sylvester intended to wait out the time limit, but if this new invitation was the result of the entire royal family learning that I was now a Zent candidate, then we were facing an entirely new situation.

"Well, erm..." I reluctantly began. "I think you're going to have a much harder time turning them down from now on."

"Why's that?" Sylvester asked. He and Florencia were both staring at me in surprise.

I directed Otilie to bring out some sound-blockers, then gave one to Sylvester and another to Karstedt, who was standing in his usual position as a guard. I didn't give one to Florencia, which made her look very concerned indeed.

"The shock of what I am about to say might be great enough to impact the baby..." I said. "Sylvester, I will allow you to decide whether we take that risk."

"Is it really that serious?"

"Yes. I would even advise that you clear the room."

Sylvester waved a hand, and our retainers all exited, leaving only the two of us, Karstedt, and Florencia. I gripped one of the sound-blockers and made my declaration:

"I'm a Zent candidate."

Sylvester and Karstedt both yelped, their eyes wide in terror. "That doesn't make any sense," Sylvester replied. "What are you even saying?!"

"I don't really understand it either, but here we are. I just kind of went with the flow, doing as the royal family asked, and... Yeah."

I'd prayed at the Royal Academy and in Ehrenfest's temple, then let Anastasius drag me to all of the gods' shrines. That much had made me a Zent candidate, but then I'd been told that I wasn't qualified, since I wasn't registered as a royal.

"I'll spare you the details, since I'm not sure whether I should be saying any of this in the first place, but I expect that I'm closer to becoming the next Zent than anyone else in the country. I wouldn't actually be able to rule, though; my blood isn't registered as belonging to the royal family. I expect that the royals are about to put more pressure on us than ever before."

"How am I only hearing this now?!"

"It only happened yesterday."

I'd wanted to tell him immediately upon my return from the underground archive, but my letter from Ferdinand had taken priority. Then, I'd ended up with a fever. I was feeling better now, at least, which was precisely why I was here.

"No matter what we do, my engagement is going to be canceled," I said. "We can hope that a member of the royal family obtains the Grutrissheit in the three years between now and my coming of age, but they will want me in their pocket in case they fail to manage that on their own."

Anastasius had retracted his claim that Sigiswald would take me as his third wife, but only so that he and his family could explore other options. The Zent might have been willing to respect Ehrenfest's circumstances and ignore the demands for me to become the next Sovereign High Bishop, but I doubted he would turn a blind eye to the fact that I was their best option for installing a proper Zent with a Grutrissheit as quickly as possible.

"My letter from Ferdinand was about me being taken by the Sovereign temple," I said, "but in any case, he wrote about how the royal family could force me to move to the Sovereignty. He also gave me some advice on how to cope if it came to that. We will need to consider what we will do if Ehrenfest is given a royal decree."

Sylvester scrunched up his face. This was an issue bigger than anything to do with the Sovereign temple. Not even an archduke would be able to refuse an order related to the next Zent and obtaining the Grutrissheit.

"Perhaps we should summon Wilfried as well," I said. "The results of this could change his life."

Sylvester contemplated the idea for a moment, then shook his head. "Nah. Not this time."

"Are you sure? This really could change everything for him, couldn't it?"

"It could, but will summoning him achieve anything? We won't be able to defy the king's orders, no matter how we feel about them, and the last thing we need right now is Wilfried causing a scene here at the Royal Academy. If the news sends him into a frenzy or he leaks everything to his retainers, we'll just have even more problems to deal with."

It was true that Sylvester and Florencia wouldn't need his help to make a case for why I should stay in Ehrenfest. On top of that, we didn't want him spreading the news that I was a Zent candidate before we'd even had a chance to formally discuss it with the royal family.

"I just won't have the time to spend with Wilfried if this sets him off," Sylvester said. "We need to decide on Ehrenfest's official position, plan how to negotiate with the royal family, and think about what conditions we should put forward. Furthermore, Wilfried is still underage; he can't attend the Archduke Conference, nor has he been summoned by the royal family. I see no reason to have him come here. He'll need to accept whatever happens, but that shouldn't be a problem; as his parents, we decide whom he marries to begin with."

Sylvester was speaking in the impartial manner of an archduke, but his brow was furrowed in a way that made his displeasure more than clear. "The royal family didn't invite you to this upcoming meeting either," he continued. "I'll negotiate as best I can, but I'm the archduke of a duchy that isn't a very influential player on the country's stage. The result may not be the one you want, so I want you to be prepared for whatever might happen."

My only choice was to leave all the negotiating to Sylvester and Florencia. I understood that perfectly well.

"I have not forgotten that you saved me and my family all that time ago," I said. "Although things seldom go as I expect, I have always tried to carry out my duties as an adopted daughter. Thus, as long as you continue to protect my family and those in the temple, as well as the Gutenbergs, then I will obey any decision that you make as the archduke."

I could tell that Sylvester was gritting his teeth. His frustration

betrayed his love for me, and as I basked in the joy of that realization, I handed a sound-blocker to Florencia. "If you were both invited, then she needs to know as well. Sylvester, please explain everything to her."

Sylvester opened his mouth, but he was so overwhelmed that no words came out.

Florencia smiled. "Based on the urgent look on your face, can I assume that we do not have time to waste on your agonizing?" she asked, urging him to speak.

"The truth is..."

Upon hearing that I was a Zent candidate, Florencia froze, smile and all. Then, after a pause, she placed a hand on her forehead. "I thought that I was used to her surprises after the winter reports, but perhaps not..."

"The royal family likely wishes to avoid any unnecessary chaos," I said, "so do not tell anyone what I have told you."

"That much is obvious," Sylvester replied. "The real mystery is the royal family's endgame."

Eglantine had told me that the royal family hoped to maintain the status quo. In their eyes, the best result would include avoiding another war between the greater duchies, and establishing Sigiswald as the next Zent.

Then I realized something: that was only what Eglantine wanted. Anastasius had said that he hoped to ease her fears, so perhaps they were the only two who felt that way. I definitely hadn't heard the Zent or Sigiswald himself speak a word about wanting me to obtain the Grutrissheit and become the first prince's third wife. Given how poorly information seemed to flow between members of the royal family, it was dangerous to jump to conclusions about what they desired.

"You are correct," I said to Sylvester. "We do not know what the royal family wants. Thus, let us stop thinking about their aims and instead consider how we can squeeze as much value for Ehrenfest out of them as possible."

"Rozemyne?!" Sylvester exclaimed. He and Florencia were both taken aback by my suggestion.

"After saying that he wanted me to become the first prince's third wife, Prince Anastasius declared that Ehrenfest should deal with its own problems. The royal family will not show us any consideration, nor will they care about what will benefit us most.

That is why we must focus on our own interests. Using last year's publishing negotiations with Dunkelfelger as guidance, let us think of a term you will refuse to budge on, one you think you can probably secure, and one that would mark the sweetest victory if obtained."

Sylvester exchanged a look with Karstedt, then put on a wry smile and said, "You're sounding a lot like a merchant." It seemed unlikely that his meeting with the royal family would immediately turn into a hard-core negotiation, but adopting the right mindset couldn't hurt. I decided to put forth basic conditions for whether the discussion was about me entering the Sovereign temple or my being a Zent candidate.

"Now, as for my three terms... I refuse to accept there being a limitation on the number of retainers I can bring to the Sovereignty. If they send me to the Sovereign temple, then I would ask to be treated as an archduke candidate, not an apprentice blue shrine maiden. I would also attempt to negotiate for more books than can be found in Ehrenfest's book room."

"C'mon, Rozemyne," Sylvester said with a grimace. "That stuff's valuable to *you*, not Ehrenfest." He was probably used to merely reviewing whatever options his scholars put together and picking the one he thought was best.

"If you think so, then make some suggestions of your own. We don't yet know how many we can tell about my circumstances, so you can't just consult your scholars as you normally would. You will all need to come up with your own ideas to secure value for Ehrenfest."

Sylvester and Florencia finally came to their senses and started considering what would benefit our duchy. They had spent more than enough time listening to scholars and discussing things with the other aubs attending the conference, so it didn't take them long to get into the swing of things. I wrote their stream of suggestions on my diptych; sorting them all based on their importance would make it that much easier for us to turn the upcoming negotiations in our favor.

"The royal family will presumably state their intentions without inquiring about our own, but we can still negotiate with them," I said. "Make it clear that we are willing to cooperate with them, but only if the arrangement is mutually beneficial. You *must* be firm about that. Last of all, tell them that they will need to speak with

me as well. After all, they will need my consent if they wish to cancel my adoption.”

The Merchant Saint

It was the dawn of a new day—a day I wouldn't be spending in the underground archive. Otilie was worried that returning to work so soon after my fever would make me sick again, while Clarissa wanted me to avoid anything even remotely strenuous. "Your health is more important than all else, Lady Rozemyne," she had told me.

"You must be exhausted after spending so many days underground, poring over documents," Otilie said. "Please take this opportunity to rest."

I returned to bed and pointed at the nearby book box. "In that case, Clarissa, fetch me something to read."

"You intend to continue reading?!"

"Of course. Reading is a hobby of mine, and how better to relax than with a book of my choosing? It might appear similar to my translation work, but I can assure you that I consider it resting."

Clarissa continued to gawk at me.

"It's been a long time since anyone responded so dramatically," I said with a chuckle, then gave her the title of a book I was only halfway through reading.

"Hartmut did warn me, but still... This is shocking to see in person."

"Lady Rozemyne has been so busy and in such great health recently that she has not had much time to read at her leisure," Lieselea explained with a giggle as she helped me get comfortable in bed.

Clarissa opened the book box and took out the title I'd requested. I asked Otilie to inform Hannelore or Magdalena of my absence, then started reading. By the time Clarissa announced that she was leaving to attend the Archduke Conference, her voice barely even reached me; my book already had my full attention.

All of a sudden, an ordonnanz perched atop my book, forcing me to look up. "This is Hildebrand," it said. "I am sorry to hear you

have fallen ill. My intention was to send you a present to raise your spirits, but Mother told me not to, since you are not supposed to be here in the first place. Get... Get well soon.”

I smiled at his cute message, then sent my response: “My fever has gone down, but my concerned retainers advised me to rest for one more day. I will be back tomorrow.”

As promised, I went to the underground archive the next day. Sylvester and Florencia were attending their meeting with the royal family—I wouldn’t find out how that went until my return to the dormitory—while Anastasius and Eglantine were busy socializing.

“Good day to you, Lady Rozemyne,” Hannelore said when she saw me. “It is wonderful to see you well again.” She knew from experience that a simple tea party could make me collapse, so she wasn’t too surprised that my trip around the Royal Academy had made me ill.

I smiled and confirmed that I was indeed feeling better, and it was then that Hildebrand came over.

“Rozemyne. I’m glad to see you have recovered.”

“Indeed, Prince Hildebrand,” I replied. “I thank you ever so much for your kind ordonnanz.”

He beamed in response, his purple eyes sparkling with joy. For a prince, he was very open with his feelings, which was cute. The way he acted at times like this reminded me of Melchior, so I ended up letting my emotions come through as well.

As we continued our conversation, I suddenly had a feeling that I was being watched. A quick scan of the room revealed that Magdalena was inspecting me closely. The moment our eyes met, she smiled and said, “Let us go into the archive, everyone.”

Once inside, I silently began working on my translation... until somebody tapped me on the back.

“Rozemyne, do you have a moment?”

I turned around to see Prince Hildebrand. “Yes?” I asked. “Is there a word you don’t recognize?” It wasn’t the first time he had requested my assistance.

“I wanted to ask you something while Mother and Hannelore are taking a break. Rozemyne...” He paused, clearly agonizing over his next words. “Are you going to obtain the Grutrissheit and become the next Zent?”

“I am not of the royal family. As a result, I am not qualified to

take on such a role.”

So my status as a Zent candidate had at last been shared among the royal family. He had been right to wait for Hannelore to leave, but I still wasn't sure this was something we should discuss in the archive.

Hildebrand took my hand. “Rozemyne, I want to help you.”

I stared at him in surprise, racking my brain to discern what he meant. I wasn't given much of a chance, though; the patter of footsteps soon interrupted us.

“Hildebrand, what are you doing?”

“Mother...” The prince had gone pale—a sign that he had probably said too much.

Magdalena looked down at me. “Lady Rozemyne, what did my son say to you, might I ask?”

“That he wished to help me,” I said. “I have already recovered from my fever, but I see that Prince Hildebrand is still so thoughtfully concerned about me.” Of course, I wasn't going to mention anything about the Zent candidacy.

Magdalena gave me a searching look, then sighed. “Hildebrand, let us *both* take a break,” she said, bringing our conversation to an end.

After lunch, we got straight back to work. Magdalena was watching Hildebrand even more closely this time, determined to ensure he would not speak to me again.

That was when Sigiswald arrived. It was my first time seeing him here since the beginning of the Archduke Conference. He commended our work in the archive for the royal family's sake, then prompted Hannelore to return to her dormitory to rest.

“I thank you ever so much for your concern,” Hannelore said to the first prince before taking her leave. She glanced back at me several times as she went, her eyes betraying her concern.

I moved to stand, only to be told to sit back down. “There is nowhere else we can speak,” Sigiswald explained with a peaceful smile while taking a seat opposite me. “Anastasius has told me that, to convey one's intentions, one must be almost offensively blunt when speaking with you. I would thus like to speak frankly, if you do not mind.”

Anastasius's phrasing annoyed me a bit, but he wasn't wrong—it was much better to be straightforward than to allow any misunderstandings to take root, especially when the royal family

was involved.

"I do not mind," I replied, "as long as I am not executed for my own bluntness."

"Fear not; we would not execute such a valuable Zent candidate," Sigiswald said with a smile, then looked at me head-on. "Indeed, Anastasius told us. He also mentioned that you cannot obtain the Grutrissheit without being registered as a member of the royal family."

It seemed that Detlinde's dedication whirl and the recent Starbind Ceremony had made the Sovereign temple appear more and more credible in the eyes of the country's nobles. As a result, calls for the old ceremonies to be revived and a true Zent to be found were getting louder. The royals had assumed that even I would manage to obtain the Grutrissheit, but... here we were.

"Just as Prince Anastasius told you, I am not qualified to obtain the Grutrissheit. I would thus advise you to have someone within the royal family secure it instead. Please ask Lady Eglantine."

"Unfortunately... the royal family does not have the leeway to do that," Sigiswald explained, looking troubled. Just as the library's equivalent of a foundation had been about to run out of mana, so, too, were countless magic tools in the Sovereignty. "Do keep this between us, but there are many magic tools in the Sovereignty that have stopped functioning entirely for a lack of anyone to supply them. Just the other day... one was destroyed."

"It was destroyed...?"

"Some magic tools crumble when they are completely drained of mana."

That was seldom the case for the magic tools we normally used, but I supposed that the ones in the Sovereignty were particularly old.

Sigiswald continued, "We cannot allow valuable magic tools that have survived since the distant past to be destroyed in our generation. Father and the rest of us are already consuming rejuvenation potions every day in our efforts to refill those that were deemed less relevant and abandoned years ago. As such, we do not have nearly enough mana to start donating to the shrines. Allow me to be blunt: our only option is to take you into the royal family as soon as possible, so that we can have both your mana and unquestionable power for the nobility to follow."

He certainly had good reason to be concerned; Yurgenschmidt

would end up on the brink of destruction if the royal family stopped fueling its magic tools.

“Under normal circumstances, we would wait until you came of age to have you married into the family and made a royal... but we cannot wait that long. We wish for you to join the royal family as soon as you are able. Our hope is that Aub Ehrenfest will disown you so that Father may adopt you in his stead, until you come of age and are wed to me. Is this not the best possible future in all cases?”

It *would* mean saving Ferdinand from having to marry Detlinde and subsequently be punished for her crimes... Leaping at the offer simply wasn't an option, though—not with Ehrenfest's current state of affairs.

“My father made Aub Ehrenfest various offers, believing that Ehrenfest should receive a just recompense for its cooperation... but the aub refused them all.”

I paused. “What were his offers?”

“They were fairly reasonable,” Sigiswald prefaced. “Father proposed raising Ehrenfest's rank, giving the duchy preferential treatment, and taking as many of its nobles into the Sovereignty as possible to strengthen your position as the future Zent.”

The royal family had expected Sylvester to be overjoyed, as greater duchies always loved gaining influence. He had turned them down, though, saying that the deal would not actually benefit Ehrenfest.

And, well, he's right.

“I must admit,” the prince continued, “we are troubled that Ehrenfest would respond so selfishly.”

“Prince Sigiswald, Ehrenfest's nobles are already struggling to keep up with the new expectations that have come with our sudden and continued rise through the rankings. Other duchies frequently tell us that we do not behave in a manner befitting our position. For those reasons, we would rather our rank stay the same—or go down, even—until we have managed to catch up. Raising it any higher would only make Ehrenfest suffer.”

Sigiswald received my explanation with wide eyes. He was in a position wherein both bottom- and top-ranking duchies were at his beck and call. Not once had he stopped to properly consider how Ehrenfest would struggle, stuck between the two extremes of the country's hierarchy as it was. He also subscribed to the mindset that

all problems should immediately be dealt with; at no point had it occurred to him that some could only be fixed through sweeping changes over the span of several years. At the same time, he had come to see Ehrenfest as a duchy with great ambitions, considering that we had passed up an even higher position in the rankings to receive the same treatment as the winners of the country's civil war.

"In that case, accepting Ehrenfest nobles into the Sovereignty to strengthen your position would also be negative...?" Sigiswald asked.

"Our duchy's population is already much too small. And, because of extreme circumstances I will not elaborate on here, we were forced to carry out a purge during the winter. Ehrenfest barely has enough nobles to support itself right now and would surely collapse if those who do remain were sent to the Sovereignty en masse."

Sigiswald put a hand on his forehead and stared at me in silence. He had clearly misunderstood what things were like in Ehrenfest.

"In short," I concluded, "Ehrenfest has its own circumstances to deal with. I cannot be adopted by the royal family at such short notice."

"Even though it is crucial to save Yurgenschmidt from a fast-approaching collapse?" There was clear anxiety in the first prince's voice, but I still refused to budge.

"The collapse you speak of can be summarized as a mana shortage, no? That can be solved by anyone. Meanwhile, Ehrenfest needs me specifically."

"Do explain," Sigiswald said, leaning forward.

"In Ehrenfest, I have duties within the printing industry and the archducal family. I also serve as the High Bishop and the director of the temple's orphanage. It will not be long before I can entrust my archduke candidate duties to my siblings, but the rest will not be so easy."

Melchior and his retainers would need to observe every ritual and ceremony before they could take over my work as High Bishop, which would take at least a year. The current state of the orphanage also needed to be preserved. There were sure to be complications with the printing industry as well; we would need to oversee the handover to Elvira and decide whether the Gutenbergs would accompany me to the Sovereignty or continue their traveling.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “my engagement to Wilfried is currently stabilizing his position as the next aub. To dissolve it would be to send Ehrenfest into chaos, which we would absolutely need to prepare for. Just as you and the rest of the royal family have wished to avoid another war between the greater duchies since the great purge, Aub Ehrenfest wishes to avoid a war between our giebes when our own purge has put the duchy in such a precarious state.”

Eglantine and Anastasius had mentioned on many an occasion that they wanted to avoid causing another civil war. I wouldn’t let them pretend not to know how we felt.

“That is not all, though; my adoptive mother is currently with child and will not be able to supply Ehrenfest with mana until she has given birth. In the winter, my little sister will perform her divine protections ritual at the Royal Academy, and this time next year, my adoptive father will take his second wife. At the very least, for mana purposes, I cannot leave Ehrenfest until then.”

“Yurgenschmidt’s mana problems are far more urgent than Ehrenfest’s...”

“Not to me,” I said, ignoring the attempted protest with a smile. “The royal family is simply in need of mana. Thus, allow me to exchange some for another year in Ehrenfest. I would also ask that you use your new understanding of our circumstances to prepare to accept a condition that will actually benefit us. Do remember that we are not one of the greater duchies you are so used to dealing with.”

Sigiswald was momentarily stone-faced; then, he smiled in turn. “My apologies. I did not seem to hear you.”

I repeated myself, word for word.

“You intend to trade a year’s worth of mana for an extra year in Ehrenfest?” Sigiswald confirmed. “You would do well to remember that there are seven members of the royal family currently supplying mana; no matter how plentiful yours may be, you cannot hope to equal us alone.” He was speaking with a peaceful smile, as if addressing a child who didn’t understand such a basic fact. Still, my expression did not waver; I already knew that my mana alone wouldn’t be enough.

“At no point have I said that I intend to use my own mana. Recall that the Royal Academy is currently *filled* with mana-rich individuals.”

Again, Sigiswald gave me a stony look. He then smiled a second time—though it seemed much less natural—and muttered, “Filled with them...?” It seemed that freezing for a moment and then smiling was his way of expressing surprise.

It reminds me of how Ferdinand freezes up when he struggles to process something.

I adopted an even broader smile, trying to emphasize my advantage, while racking my brain for my victory conditions. In the best possible outcome, I would inform the country that another Dedication Ritual was to be held—not for my sake but for the benefit of the royal family—then delegate the preparations and secure myself enough mana to purchase another year in Ehrenfest. The royal family would also help us to earn a bit more gratitude from the other duchies, since our nobles had such a hard time managing that on their own. Then, from our superior position, we would oblige them to accept as many of our demands as possible in return for my adoption into the royal family.

A switch inside of me had flipped, and now I was in full merchant mode. I looked Sigiswald straight in the eye; my aim in this opening battle was to secure, at minimum, a year of time. I would not act as subserviently as the average noble, merely nodding in compliance as the royal family listed off one demand after another; instead, I would take complete control of the conversation. In this verbal wrestling match, I was going to have complete control of the ring.

The man in front of me was no longer a prince but merely someone for me to bargain with. Much like Sylvester, those of the royal family usually left negotiating to their scholars and just delivered the final verdict. Doing this here in the archive, where Sigiswald was alone and without his retainers, vastly improved my chances of success.

I need to use every tool at my disposal to get more time in Ehrenfest and guarantee that the royal family will secure Ferdinand more hospitable living conditions. Here I go! Benno, lend me your strength!

“Let us perform a Dedication Ritual during this year’s Archduke Conference,” I suggested.

“You intend to take mana from the gathered aubs...?” Sigiswald replied, his lips twitching ever so slightly. “That would be unprecedented.”

Perhaps, but the royal family had already demonstrated that it

was willing to gather mana from students; accepting some from the aubs wouldn't be much of a leap. Plus, I didn't intend to take mana *only* from the aubs—the retainers accompanying them would participate in the ritual as well.

When you get an opportunity, take it and profit as much as you possibly can. Isn't that right, Benno?

“Oh my. Is there a reason for your surprise?” I asked.

“Performing the Dedication Ritual is necessary to grant your wish, is it not?”

Sigiswald evidently hadn't connected the two; he gave me a look of concern and even cocked his head a little, causing his luxurious golden locks to sway. “My wish...? Do you mean my desire for you to be adopted by the Zent, obtain the Grutrissheit, and marry me after coming of age?”

“Not quite. Your wish, as I understand it from Aub Ehrenfest and the scholars who have accompanied him, is for me to become the Sovereign High Bishop, visit duchies to perform religious ceremonies, and inspire better harvests and more divine protections throughout the land. Is raising Yurgenschmidt's mana average not your highest priority?”

“That is—”

Sigiswald attempted to protest, but I didn't give him a chance. “That was what you asked of Aub Ehrenfest, was it not? I am confident in my assertion.” His demands from just a few days ago had put Ehrenfest's nobles through the wringer, so I wasn't going to let him act like the whole thing hadn't happened.

“Thus,” I continued, “I will perform the Dedication Ritual, as per your wish. Having the country's aubs and nobles participate should give them a much better understanding of the importance of their temples and religious ceremonies. It should also give them enough experience to repeat the process at home, thereby improving their harvests and allowing them to obtain more divine protections. The Sovereign temple will surely be on board, considering their requests for more mana-rich individuals to perform religious ceremonies.”

The nobles of other duchies had been pushing for the “Saint of Ehrenfest” to be made the Sovereign High Bishop and bestow upon them her knowledge of religious ceremonies. Meanwhile, the Sovereign temple wanted a mana-rich High Bishop, since they couldn't perform the old rituals without one. Both parties would be

made to participate in the Dedication Ritual—and, as far as I saw it, there was absolutely no way that either of them could refuse.

They can learn one of the ceremonies they're so desperate to perform, and we can squeeze every drop of mana out of them. Easy.

“Not only will this raise the mana average in every single duchy—an outcome that you and the rest of the royal family strongly desire—but it will also secure you an abundance of mana. This, in turn, will allow me another year in Ehrenfest. Would you not describe this as a wonderful idea that benefits everyone?”

Once again, Sigiswald was giving me a blank look. There was a pause as he processed my question, then he suddenly started, and a smile returned to his face. “Indeed, that is a wonderful idea, but when exactly would this ritual take place?”

On occasion, the Archduke Conference could end up lasting for more than two weeks. We still had over a week to go, which was plenty of time to prepare for the ritual. Sure, the schedule would need to be a little bit tighter than usual, since we would need to get everything ready while the conference was being held, but I didn’t expect that to be much of an issue; the Sovereignty had plenty more nobles than Ehrenfest usually managed with.

“The last day of the Archduke Conference should do,” I said.

“That would give everyone more than enough time to prepare.”

“That is still too soon. We cannot suddenly amend the schedule when so many nobles are due to be involved.”

Sigiswald was presumably used to his attendants and scholars making his plans for him; in fact, it wouldn’t have surprised me to hear that he simply went around doing as instructed. He must not have had to experience other people abruptly changing their plans, forcing him to update his schedule on painfully short notice. That was the impression I got from his reluctance to my suggestion, anyway.

I could also tell that Sigiswald was finding my stream of seemingly eccentric suggestions to be exhausting. As a prince, he wasn’t at all used to dealing with such matters himself, and there was nobody here for him to consult. That wasn’t going to stop me, though; I was determined to drive him into a corner.

I need to go all out now so that Sylvester can have an easier time dealing with the royal family in the future!

“Oh my...” I said, feigning surprise. “Prince Sigiswald, I never expected you to be so hesitant about this Dedication Ritual. I

thought you would embrace it as the perfect idea—especially after you proclaimed that raising the country’s mana average was our highest priority.” I placed a hand on my cheek and allowed a few crocodile tears to wet my eyes. “Did you lie to me about the urgency of the mana crisis? Was your intention simply to get me into the Sovereign temple to appease the aubs of other duchies?”

“I would never...”

“Aub Ehrenfest was ever so troubled by the royal family’s request that I serve as the new Sovereign High Bishop... To think the mana crisis was but a ruse all along...” Taking inspiration from Angelica, I cast my eyes down in an attempt to look heartbroken. The impact was enormous; Sigiswald cast aside his smile and desperately shook his head.

“Please wait, Rozemyne. This is all a misunderstanding. It is unequivocally true that we must raise the mana average among Yurgenschmidt’s nobles with great haste. However... surely such a large-scale ceremony must be performed only after extensive discussion with the Sovereign temple and the relevant scholars. I was simply surprised that you would make such a suggestion when we had not already factored it into our plans. The preparations will take time, of which we have so little.”

Ooh... That’s what you’re going to say? Bad move.

Now it was my turn to be stone-faced. After working his way through various excuses, Sigiswald asked me whether I understood, his usual smile now back on his face. I gave him an exceptionally cold grin as I delivered my response.

“Prince Sigiswald, might I ask you a question?”

“By all means.”

“It was never a life goal of mine to be taken into the royal family. Still, is it not normally the case that the Zent’s adoption of an archduke candidate should take place only after he has had an extensive conversation with the respective aub, and enough time has passed to allow for the relevant plans and preparations to be made?”

Sigiswald merely stared at me, his lips still politely curved. I took his silence as an opportunity to continue.

“Tell me, which is more sudden and drastic: being ordered to prepare for a Dedication Ritual, or being ordered to join the royal family as the king’s adopted daughter? Is my adoption really so trivial that you would choose the former? It surprises me that

Ehrenfest and I mean so little to you all.”

The prince blinked at me several times, now looking very serious indeed. He might have thought I was some demure rich girl who would accept his every word, or maybe he had only ever faced people who expressed their slight criticisms indirectly through euphemisms.

At last, he said, “In no way do we look down on you or on Ehrenfest. We act because your adoption is urgent and necessary.”

“No, what is truly ‘urgent and necessary’ is solving the royal family’s mana shortage. If you are so desperate that you cannot wait for me to come of age and would throw Ehrenfest into chaos, then I am sure you could order the Sovereign temple and the aubs to prepare for the Dedication Ritual. That may seem unreasonable, but so is the request you have made of me. Besides, I thought it was the royal family’s specialty to ignore everybody else’s intentions when making demands.”

“Do you honestly believe that we are prioritizing our own needs?” Sigiswald asked, taken aback. “It may seem as though we are being selfish, but we are attempting to maximize the benefit for everyone.”

I grimaced. “Given that you are consulting me, I can accept that you have at least some desire to accommodate others. In practice, however, you have repeated the royal family’s needs time and time again while ignoring my circumstances. Have you made even one suggestion for my benefit? In the first place, these needs for mana, the Grutrissheit, my adoption, and the aubs’ education about religious ceremonies... They are all what *you* desire. Not a single one of them helps Ehrenfest or me. Do you understand that?”

In truth, I *did* want to obtain and read the Grutrissheit, but I wasn’t going to say that here. I needed to drive Sigiswald into a corner so that he would agree for the royal family to hold another Dedication Ritual.

“The only reason I am suggesting this troublesome Dedication Ritual is because it suits the needs of the royal family. For religious ceremonies and the like, the aubs can simply consult their own temples and deal with the situation themselves. Even Prince Anastasius said that duchies must take care of their own problems.”

After listening closely to my explanation, Sigiswald cocked his head at me. “The purpose of the ritual would be to allow you another year in Ehrenfest, but you and your duchy are the ones who

need that time, not us.”

The royal family had been unsuccessfully searching for the Grutrissheit for years, and now it was dangling right before their eyes; no doubt they had lost sight of everything else. I thrust the reality of our situation straight into the prince’s confused face.

“It has only been a few days since I was determined to be closest to obtaining the Grutrissheit. You and the rest of the royal family keep making my adoption sound simple, so does that mean everything is ready for me? Baptized royals are given villas, are they not?”

Yes, signing an adoption agreement was simple enough, but that was far from the only thing that would need to be considered. To live as the king’s adopted daughter, I would need a villa, items to furnish it, retainer candidates from among the Sovereign’s nobles, living quarters for any Ehrenfest retainers who accompanied me, Sovereign capes and brooches, and so much more than what immediately came to mind.

“I do not believe the royal family could adopt me without first making the necessary arrangements,” I said. “Or do you not intend to give me a villa? Could it be that you plan to toss me into the Sovereign temple and have me serve as its High Bishop until my coming of age? That must be the case, unless you mean to tell me you prepared my accommodation in but a few days. Oh, with such talented Sovereign nobles, it should take not even one day to prepare a mere Dedication Ritual. How reassuring.”

Sigiswald gazed across the room, still maintaining a smile. His dark-green eyes eventually came to rest on the space outside the archive, where his retainers were awaiting his return. Hildebrand and Magdalena were there too, but they must have been told not to interrupt our discussion; they were both looking in our direction yet made no attempt to approach us.

“To clarify... we were going to give you a room in one of our villas,” Sigiswald eventually said, practically forcing out the words. “We planned to have you stay with my mother, who would by then be your adoptive mother, or me...”

“Oh?” I gave him a look of exaggerated shock. “Is it customary for the royal family to grant villas only to their biological children while giving their adopted children naught but a single room? If so, then this is my first time hearing about it. Rumors paint my adoptive father as a cruel man who also discriminates between his

children, but he ensured that my accommodation was equal to that of my siblings. Would the Zent grant me less than that? How am I to believe you are not looking down on Ehrenfest and me when you intend to treat me so poorly?”

That hit Sigiswald where it hurt; he winced, then blinked frantically as he tried to come up with a response. The fact that *a prince* could no longer fake a smile was confirmation that I now dominated the conversation.

“Were I to take the time to identify every single problem with your suggestion, I would no longer need the Dedication Ritual.”

I shouldn't actually do that, though. I don't want the royal family and the other duchies to resent me going forward.

This was my last resort, but in his state of panic, Sigiswald surely thought I was only stating the obvious. I could guess as much from his lack of protests.

I continued, “You are right that a sudden Dedication Ritual will prove inconvenient, so I understand why the royal family might not consider it the best course of action. However, I suggested it so that *everyone* can have an extra year to do what they need to. Perhaps I should help with the ritual. Or shall we exchange something else for the time we require?”

I stared Sigiswald down. He was staring back at me, searching for my intent.

After a prolonged standoff, the prince sighed. “I shall heed your advice, with gratitude, and advise the Zent that we perform another Dedication Ritual.” He seemed to have decided to cut his losses, so I made a whole list of extra suggestions that would prevent Ehrenfest from needing to participate.

“Ehrenfest would struggle to obtain permission to use the altar and divine instruments, so we will leave preparing for the Dedication Ritual to the Sovereignty. Using the auditorium without its stage would allow enough space for the aubs’ retainers to participate as well.”

Sigiswald froze, then smiled—his usual routine. “You intend to have the retainers participate as well as the aubs? Just how much mana do you mean to take?”

“Well, what can I say?” I puffed out my chest, then repeated what Benno had taught me: “I was raised to believe that when an opportunity arises, one should take it and profit as much as possible.”

“So this is what people mean when they say the temple-raised understand things differently...” Sigiswald murmured, looking conflicted.

Close, but nope! I was raised as a commoner, not a shrine maiden! Too bad for you!

“If you would allow me to offer some more advice,” I said, “making the Dedication Ritual an annual occurrence would greatly benefit everyone. In this case, why not allow participating duchies to repeat the divine protections ritual each year, thereby encouraging them to participate? The process takes a while, so I would expect only two duchies to be able to complete their rituals per Archduke Conference. However, if presented with a once-in-a-decade opportunity to obtain more divine protections, any duchy would start taking religious ceremonies seriously.”

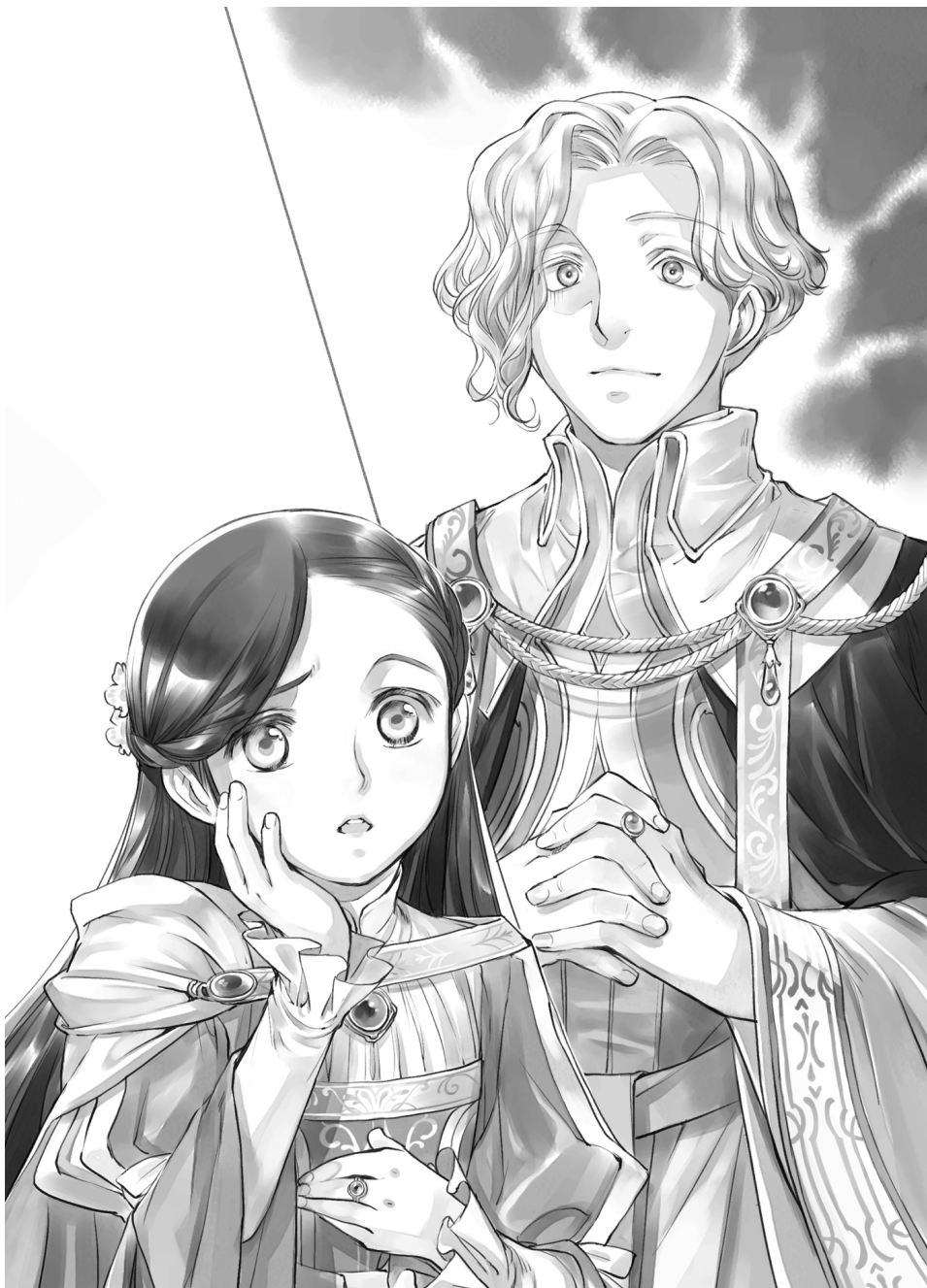
If they truly wished to raise the country’s mana average, then adults would need to take the ceremonies seriously as well. Their contributions would encourage the children to do the same.

“Furthermore,” I continued, “Aub Klassenberg has already asked us about performing the Dedication Ritual at the Royal Academy on a yearly basis. If you handle this well, you will receive boons of mana at the end of each spring *and* winter.”

“Rozemyne, mana is not something you should trade so lightly.”

“But adopting me is? As you have made clear, the mana crisis is so urgent that the royal family must use *any* method at its disposal to obtain more. Should you not spend your time coming up with as many approaches as you can?”

This time, Sigiswald froze completely. I could gather from his wide-open eyes that the royal family had never expected such a suggestion.



“Of course, these are but a few ideas that come to mind, but where the royal family sources its mana and whether the Dedication Ritual becomes a yearly event have absolutely nothing to do with me. May I continue to outline what preparations must be made before the ritual can be performed?”

“Yes, of course...” the prince said, though he was barely keeping up.

I took some paper and started to write, keeping my eyes down as I delivered my lesson. “It would not take much effort to prepare ordonnances or invitations to be sent to the various duchies, informing them of the date of the event and what they will need to bring. If you have the nobles staying in the villas prepare empty feystones, and the Sovereign temple prepare for the ritual, then it should not impact the Archduke Conference very much at all. We can use the large chalices from both the Royal Academy and the Sovereign temple. Oh yes, and now that Spring Prayer is over, we can also make use of the small chalices. Have the Sovereign temple prepare those as well.”

At that point, I stopped writing and abruptly looked up at Sigiswald. He flinched when he saw my smile, no doubt sensing danger. He was right to be wary.

“Also, be certain to have the royal family advertise that the Dedication Ritual is being held thanks to Ehrenfest’s assistance. We have been a bottom-ranking duchy for so long that we are not so skilled at marketing ourselves.”

“Hold on a moment. You expect the royal family to promote Ehrenfest?” Sigiswald asked, struggling to grasp the very idea.

I nodded as though it were obvious. “If you want me; Hartmut, our High Priest; and my guard knights clad in blue to participate, then that is our fee. You said the royal family is attempting to maximize the benefit for everyone, did you not?”

Sigiswald drew his lips together in a frown. Then he sighed, gave a peaceful smile, and promised to help Ehrenfest earn the other duchies’ favor. This would be infinitely more effective than leaving it to our nobles, who were still pretty heavy-footed when it came to political maneuvering. Sylvester would be so happy when he found out.

Sylvester, Benno... I did it! This is a decisive victory for this opening

stage, right?

I gave Sigiswald the notes that I'd made. He looked them over, then said, "I wonder, though... will the duchies not be displeased to have so much of their mana taken?"

"If you establish well in advance that the mana is a payment to participate in a ritual which will increase one's odds of obtaining divine protections, then you should not receive too many complaints. The duchies that really take issue can simply not participate."

"Will that not cause fewer duchies to take part? Will we obtain enough mana to justify the time spent preparing for it?" Sigiswald asked. Indeed, as I gazed at him, only one thought came to mind:

This guy sure is a prince.

"Those who participate in the Dedication Ritual will see the good it does for their harvests and future divine protections. Those who are reluctant might be forced to think twice if you express your regret that the other duchies will get wealthier and ultimately leave them behind."

Klassenberg would participate at the mention of the Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual, while Drewanchel would not even need to be prompted, since the entire duchy was tremendously eager to obtain more divine protections. Not to mention, the duchies that had missed their opportunity to participate in the Royal Academy's previous ritual would surely not want to miss this chance as well.

"In addition, when we allow them to repeat the divine protections ritual, they will be greatly rewarded," I said. "If you hint at the knowledge gained from the underground archive, many duchies will surely leap at the chance. You will not need to fret about the turnout."

Sigiswald shut his eyes for a long moment, then once again sighed and smiled. He appeared to be quite thoroughly shaken; perhaps I was too sharp-tongued for the pampered prince.

Well, my mentors were Benno and Ferdinand, so there isn't much I can do about that!

"Oh, and as this is a ritual for educating duchies that have never participated in a religious ceremony before, I do not believe the royal family will need to take part as you did in the winter," I added.

Sigiswald was relieved to hear that. "I see. We will prepare the

ceremony ourselves and encourage the duchies to participate. However, could we ask you to make the rejuvenation potions? In the Sovereignty, we must prioritize making them for the royal family.”

“The duchies would prepare their own, would they not? Most nobles keep at least one on their hip, so you would need only warn them to bring spares.”

At once, the prince’s eyes widened. “But did Ehrenfest not prepare them for the Royal Academy’s ceremony?”

“Back then, we were having duchies participate in our research, so we thought it necessary to give them a reward. On this occasion, however, Ehrenfest will already be offering its time and expertise to teach the country about rituals at the royal family’s request. I do not see any reason why we would also need to prepare rejuvenation potions. Is it not far more important that I continue working through the documents in the underground archive?”

I’ll need to enjoy it while I can. Once the Archduke Conference ends, the handover and such will take up so much of my time that I probably won’t get to read for an entire year.

This was my only chance to visit the underground archive, and reading time was obviously far more important than rejuvenation potions.

I continued, “We could also make them to sell, but I do not consider that an option; Drewanchel would purchase our entire stock and devote its resources to replicating our recipe. Perhaps we could instead sell the most powerful of the rejuvenation potions taught in class, but again, I oppose the idea. Those are owned by everyone and would not bring much profit to Ehrenfest.”

Having the knights gather at our spot so that our already busy scholars could make rejuvenation potions would only burden us.

“I now see why Ehrenfest has grown so wealthy all of a sudden,” Sigiswald said. Exhaustion then crept into his smile. “I am also painfully aware why the nobles of your duchy are struggling to keep up with their new rank.”

I smiled back. “It truly is wonderful that we have come to understand each other better. Let us conclude our discussion about the Dedication Ritual and move on to my conditions for becoming the king’s adopted daughter.”

“There’s still more?!”

Hm? That was just the preliminary topic. We haven’t even

addressed the most pressing issue yet, have we?

Conditions for Being Adopted

“Do you even need to ask?” I said. “All we have done so far is agree upon a way to buy ourselves more time. There is still no reason for Ehrenfest to agree to the adoption.”

“How is the extra year not already beneficial enough?” Sigiswald asked, caution arising in his eyes. “You were the one to suggest it, and why would you ask us to do something that you would not profit from?”

More than that, I wanted to know why he had thought that a year to prepare would count as a perk of my adoption.

I sighed. “If some urgent circumstance required you to leave for another duchy and stay there, would you be able to move right away? You would need time to make arrangements and pass your mantle, among other things. And, in this scenario, if you were given but a year to prepare, would you consider it a gracious gift that benefited you and the Sovereignty?”

“I am an adult, whereas you are still underage. No matter how much you might be doing in Ehrenfest, I shoulder so much more.”

Only then did it occur to me that his understanding of my duties differed greatly from my own. The royal family seemed to think that I did no more than any other child of an aub.

Aah. So that's why they thought I would come as soon as they were ready for me.

“Prince Sigiswald, I do not think you understand—when it comes to the printing industry and the temple, I am not merely assisting Aub Ehrenfest or preparing for the future. *I* am the one in charge. That is why my handover would take me so long.”

“But you are underage,” the prince remarked with a stiff smile. “You must have adult guardians who oversee your work.”

“How bold of you to say that,” I replied, fixing him with the coldest look I could manage while still seeming courteous. “*I used to* have a guardian, but he was sent to Ahrensbach by royal decree. Now, there is nobody to oversee me in the temple. I am the High Bishop and orphanage director, while the High Priest is one of my

retainers. Of course, he would accompany me to the Sovereignty alongside my other retainers, meaning we would need to train a new High Bishop, orphanage director, and High Priest in just one year.”

We already had adults in those positions, but they would presumably leave with me, which would cause a lot of problems for Ehrenfest. There was zero chance that Hartmut would stay behind—he would ensure he was coming to the Sovereignty no matter how much it inconvenienced the rest of us.

I don't want to sound too confident, but Clarissa would absolutely come along too!

“In a single year,” I said, “my replacements would need to memorize each ceremony’s prayers and procedures, as well as the arrangements necessary to perform them. The burden is certainly a heavy one; religious ceremonies have a direct and sizable impact on the duchy’s harvest, and one cannot read the High Bishop’s bible without an understanding of ancient language. Do you realize now that the handover will not be simple?”

I couldn’t help but grin; those of the royal family still weren’t able to read the old writings, so there was nothing they could say in protest.

Sigiswald gave me a scrutinizing look, searching for the true meaning behind my words, before eventually conceding. “What is Aub Ehrenfest thinking?” he muttered. “Making such a young child the highest authority in so many fields is far from normal.”

“Hartmut, the man whom Ferdinand trained to replace him as High Priest, is both my retainer and an adult. We thought he was perfect for the role, as did Aub Ehrenfest, and we expected to have until my coming of age to train his successor. I would rather you not assume that Ehrenfest can simply take skilled workers from other duchies as the Sovereignty does. I did say that we were suffering from a lack of manpower, no?”

Sigiswald cast his eyes down a little. Only now, after all this time, was he realizing that a simple statement could give way to all sorts of drastically different interpretations.

“Even those who simply marry into another duchy require a year or two to settle their affairs, secure what they will require for their new life, and say their farewells, do they not?” I asked. “How, then, can the single year that Ehrenfest has been given—no, that it has needed to bargain for—be considered generous by any means?”

As I subtly bad-mouthed the royal family for not having allowed us more time to begin with, I thought about my future plans. Considering the state of the printing industry and the fact that the Gutenbergs wouldn't be back from Kirnberger until autumn, I really would have preferred two or three years, if possible.

I continued, "A single year will not even come close to compensating for the devastating losses that Ehrenfest will suffer in my absence. As for me, I will need to give up my reading time so that I can devote myself to training a replacement High Bishop, orphanage director, and overseer of the printing industry. It is a given that the royal family will need to make up for what our duchy is going to lose, but what is being offered on top of that? I cannot agree to a deal that does not benefit Ehrenfest overall."

The prince had just seen my determination to squeeze as much value from the other duchies as possible, and now he was quaking in fear over how thoroughly I would wring out the royal family.

"I can understand the High Bishop and orphanage director parts," he said, "but the printing industry? Are you in charge of that as well?"

"Most of my immediate control over Ehrenfest's printing industry has already been passed on, so I do not expect that part of the handover process to be much of an issue. There are still many questions to be answered, though: Shall we bring the industry to the Sovereignty? How many of my personnel will accompany me? Will they be allowed to open stores there? Will they be able to build workshops? Oh, and then we must decide how many craftspeople I will bring with me, how many I will need to hire anew, how long they should train for, how they will do business with Sovereign merchants and stores... As you can see, there are plenty of details that need to be ironed out. The workload is so daunting that one would seldom even want to think about it, as I am sure you would agree."

Sigiswald stared at the table for a few seconds, stone-faced, then smiled. "That is the work of scholars and attendants, not archduke candidates."

"Of course, I will entrust as much to them as I am able, but I will still need to do the final checks myself, as I am sure you can imagine. Documents do not always reflect the full truth, scholars are not always entirely honest in their reports, and the methods

employed in Ehrenfest differ from those of the Sovereignty.”

I recalled times when scholars had given inaccurate reports about problematic situations in an attempt to avoid seeming incompetent. On many occasions, one had to check the front lines in person to confirm what was actually happening.

“That is remarkable insight, Rozemyne. I see that you truly are in charge of such things.”

“Indeed. All the more reason for you to trust me when I say that a single year is not nearly enough time,” I said, forcefully repeating my wish.

Sigiswald shook his head, maintaining his polite expression. “Though I understand your circumstances, and the amount of mana obtained during the Dedication Ritual may change things somewhat, there is only so long we can wait. Do your best to finish everything within the next year. Now, I wish to ask what Ehrenfest would propose as compensation for its losses. It may be best if we allow Lady Magdalena to join us.” His green eyes were visibly tense, no doubt because of the upcoming negotiations.

“Um, Prince Sigiswald... I will discuss Ehrenfest’s conditions with you, but you must know that I will state my own opinions purely so that misunderstandings and unnoticed discrepancies can be corrected. In the end, Aub Ehrenfest and the Zent must make the final decisions. I do not see the need to summon Lady Magdalena to a conversation such as this.”

No matter what I said, I did not have the authority to decide on matters of such great importance to the duchy. Sylvester would decide on Ehrenfest’s behalf during a meeting with the Zent and everyone else.

“As we have now come to an understanding on common-sense subjects and the nature of value,” I said, “you need only convey my requests to the Zent. After all, it does not fall to us to decide what terms are presented and agreed upon in the end.”

I was stressing that this wasn’t going to be a decisive conversation so that I wouldn’t be scolded for going over the aub’s head or saying things that I shouldn’t have. Plus, it was the perfect escape route for me if the royal family targeted one weakness or another of mine; I could just say that the final decision rested with Aub Ehrenfest.

On that note, I could use similar logic for our discussion about the Dedication Ritual. Though it was my suggestion, Sigiswald had

ultimately decided to go through with it, meaning I hadn't acted on my own.

I just made a few suggestions and taunted him a little. The royal family will need to take care of and pay for things, so... we're good.

Above all else, it had only been last year when the royal family elected to move Ferdinand to Ahrensbach by royal decree, which an archduke could do nothing to oppose. I could still remember how much that had pained Sylvester, and I wasn't going to have him be powerless again.

"Ah yes. This is not something for us to decide between ourselves," Sigiswald said with a chuckle; learning that I didn't have a final say in the matter had come as a tremendous relief to him.

"Pray tell, what are your conditions for the adoption?"

Have I made him dislike me, I wonder? Well, whatever.

"Aub Ehrenfest will want to make his own requests, I imagine, but I will tell you mine. If these conditions are accepted alongside a year or more of preparation time, I will accept the adoption without any fuss. Of course, if they are refused, I will not resort to treason or anything of the sort. I do not intend to cause any undue trouble, I can assure you."

"I see," Sigiswald replied. Sylvester had only recently refused the royal family's previous suggestions, so my little preface must have come as welcome news.

"However," I continued, taking this opportunity to drive a point home, "I *would* seriously rethink my relationship with the rest of the royal family. I cannot get along with those who would prioritize themselves and the country while showing such blatant disregard for my duchy. Ehrenfest is my Geduldh, and I was raised in the temple—please remember this if you intend to have me adopted."

It was no doubt considered normal for someone being adopted or married into another duchy to prioritize their new home first and foremost, but it wasn't as if Sylvester canceling my current adoption would make me forget my connection to Ehrenfest. This definitely wasn't something to brag about, but I was still attached to Ferdinand and the lower city despite them both having been taken away from me. I valued them dearly and would doubtless fly into a violent rage if they were put in danger.

"I understand that it is best not to expect common sense to apply to you. So, what payment do you seek for Ehrenfest?" Sigiswald asked, urging me on with a calm countenance.

“I said the same to Prince Anastasius, but I want Ferdinand to be freed from his engagement and returned to Ehrenfest. His return would solve most of our problems.”

It would only take a year for Ferdinand to resolve our mana shortage, contain the Leisegangs, and train our successors—plus, I would no longer need to worry about his health. During my two-year slumber in the jureve, Justus had taken over communications with the lower-city merchants.

“I am sure that Anastasius has already told you this, but we cannot simply return Ferdinand to Ehrenfest; doing so would mean bringing Ahrensbach to ruin,” Sigiswald said, rejecting the best option for Ehrenfest before even running it by the Zent. “It might be possible if you were to send another unmarried, unengaged member of an archducal family to govern Ahrensbach in his stead, but we cannot think of any suitable candidates. If you know of any from Ehrenfest, convince them to accept and introduce them to us within the next year.”

Indeed, that was basically what Anastasius had said. It seemed that not a single person in the royal family was willing to let Ferdinand out of Ahrensbach. That peeved me, but it was well within my expectations; as much as I didn’t want to accept it, Ferdinand was now so deeply rooted in Ahrensbach’s power structure that he couldn’t easily be removed.

In which case, I just need to secure his safety and improve his living conditions.

Sylvester had told me that Ferdinand was gone and that we could no longer consider him part of our duchy. Thus, as Aub Ehrenfest, he wasn’t going to bargain for him during these negotiations. I would need to take matters into my own hands.

Prince Anastasius said that I should, after all.

I tightened my expression, then smiled. The first prince’s smile wavered, but only for a moment.

“I understand that canceling Ferdinand’s engagement would not be feasible right now,” I said. “I also understand that obtaining the Grutrissheit would potentially change that.” My intention was to see whether Anastasius’s opinion was shared by others in the royal family.

Sigiswald nodded slowly. “Yes, obtaining the Grutrissheit would make canceling the engagement possible.”

“Then I would ask that you delay the wedding until either I

obtain the Grutrissheit or we confirm that I will never be able to. He can avoid punishment by association as long as he is not married to Lady Detlinde, correct?”

It's simple: if canceling the engagement requires me to get the Grutrissheit, then we can just stall it until that happens.

Sigiswald crossed his arms and fell into thought. “We cannot delay their Starbinding any longer than we have already. Considering the potential impact on Letizia’s status at the Royal Academy, they will need to be married in the event that Detlinde becomes aub.”

As soon as Detlinde dyed Ahrensbach’s foundation and was recognized as the duchy’s aub during the following Archduke Conference, Ahrensbach law would demand that Letizia be reduced to the status of an archnoble. To prevent that, they would need to ensure that Letizia was adopted between the Starbind Ceremony held on the first day of the conference and the aub confirmations at the end. Her status at the Royal Academy would change drastically depending on whether she entered as an archduke candidate or an archnoble.

“In that case, could the royal family not simply nullify that bizarre law which has seen so many archduke candidates fall in status?”

“Only aubs may nullify duchy laws. We made the same suggestion as you, but the late Aub Ahrensbach did not act on our advice, so there is nothing more we can do.”

As long as a duchy’s practices didn’t contradict *The Book of Laws*, the royal family wouldn’t have the power to change them. Duchy laws usually arose from unique historical problems and incidents, so while they sometimes appeared to be bizarre or pointless from an outside perspective, they were often crucial to the smooth operation of the duchy that followed them.

Speaking of which, I guess Dunkelfelger has a bunch of strange laws too, owing to its long history.

“If your objective is to prevent Ferdinand from being deemed guilty by association, then should we not hasten your adoption into the royal family?” Sigiswald asked.

The Starbind Ceremony was held on the first day of the Archduke Conference, so the idea was for me to be adopted a short while before the conference and then return to the archive. Obtaining the Grutrissheit then and there would mean I could save

Ferdinand from having to marry Detlinde, whereas failing to obtain it would simply result in their marriage proceeding normally. No matter what happened, Letizia would not be disadvantaged.

“Of course, this will give you slightly less than the year you have requested,” the prince explained. “Is that acceptable?”

My eyes wandered a bit. Ferdinand had instructed me to delay things for at least a year, but would a little bit less than that be okay? I would need to ask.

“I cannot give you an answer right now,” I said. “I must consider how much time we will need to safely release Ferdinand from his engagement. In the meantime, until the day he is either freed or married, he is going to be trapped in Ahrensbach as a mere guest. I would ask that the Zent order that he be given a hidden room, at the very least.”

Sigiswald went from being relaxed that I was no longer pushing the issue to being completely stone-faced. Then, predictably enough, he smiled. “It is customary for those marrying into another duchy to live as guests and not have their own hidden rooms until they are wed. I do not think we would be able to force such a demand on Ahrensbach.”

I could guess from his polite tone that he thought my temple upbringing had once again made me ignorant about noble culture, but he was sorely mistaken; Florencia and Bonifatius had educated me already. In any case, if Sigiswald wanted to appeal to tradition, so be it. I would simply fight fire with fire.

“I am aware of that custom,” I replied, “which is why I did not make my request sooner. But do you know what else is customary? Engagements being canceled as a result of persistent delays. Given the complications he has faced thus far, Ferdinand would normally have reason enough to return to Ehrenfest and ask for things with Lady Detlinde to be broken off. The royal decree is forcing him to stay engaged to her, but the least you can do is allow him to return to Ehrenfest while he waits. As long as the engagement is not canceled, it will not breach the royal decree whatsoever.”

One could not force a bride or groom to stay in another duchy if, after they arrived, their wedding was suddenly delayed. Such a critical error smacked of negligence on the receiving duchy’s part, and it was a serious enough problem that the bride or groom would be entirely within their rights to cancel the engagement entirely.

Sigiswald shook his head. “Not only was Ferdinand paired with

Detlinde by a royal decree, but he is also now responsible for a lot of very important administrative work in Ahrensbach; he cannot return to Ehrenfest for fear that he might leak sensitive information. You can understand that as an archduke candidate, can you not?"

"I understand that Ferdinand carrying out such crucial duties in the first place despite being only a guest proves the unmistakable selfishness of Ahrensbach and the royal family. Based on tradition, he has every right to return home."

To be clear, Ferdinand had accepted the royal decree and cut ties with Ehrenfest to avoid troubling us. It was unlikely that he would even want to return, but that had nothing to do with this negotiation. My focus right now was securing him a hidden room.

"If you and the rest of the royal family really do value tradition, then allow Ferdinand to return to Ehrenfest until Ahrensbach's foundation has been dyed and the wedding can finally take place. If you do not, you must demand that he be given a hidden room. Then, during the late Aub Ahrensbach's funeral in the summer, the royal family should confirm that Ahrensbach has actually done as instructed. You refuse to cancel the engagement, which leaves me no choice but to ensure that Ferdinand at least has better living conditions."

Faced with a choice between one compromise or another, Sigiswald gave a broad smile and then let out a quiet sigh. "In any case, this is not a decision I can make myself. I will leave the final verdict to Father. Is that acceptable?"

Although the happiest outcome was for Ferdinand to return home, I understood that not even tradition would allow for that when he was currently shouldering Ahrensbach's government and teaching Letizia. That was exactly why I needed to ensure he got a hidden room.

I nodded, figuring that it was fine to leave the decision to the Zent.

Sigiswald eyed me carefully, his expression unchanged. "You certainly are invested in Ferdinand, Rozemyne."

"Of course. Back when I was in the temple, I was more sickly than you could even imagine. His hard work and supply of potions saved my life. Then, he diligently trained me to ensure that I would survive in noble society. It is because of his teachings that I am able to come first-in-class each year at the Royal Academy. I owe so much to him, yet not even a fraction of my debt has been repaid.

He is my mentor and, in my eyes, family.”

At the very least, I wanted to leave this room with the prince’s guarantee that Ferdinand would not be deemed guilty by association.

I continued, “I want the royal family to imagine the worry that his current situation brings me, and the fury that I feel toward those who forced it upon him in the first place. Ferdinand, who is so precious to me, was moved to a duchy on poor terms with Ehrenfest, forced into an engagement, and thrust into a predicament that requires him to be as dependent on potions as King Trauerqual. He is forbidden from returning home even now that his wedding has been postponed, and despite his love of spending time in his workshop, immersed in research, he has not even been given a hidden room. I assure you, what you imagine will not be pleasant.”

Sigiswald was frozen in place. Though the corners of his mouth were still drawn upward, the blood was draining from his face.

I placed a hand on my cheek and sighed. “Worst of all, on top of everything that Ferdinand is having to endure, he is going to be punished for Lady Detlinde’s crimes. I must admit, no matter how often I am told to view him as a stranger now that he lives in Ahrensbach, I find myself unable to stay calm. I have never been good at containing my emotions, and my mana is infamous for rampaging out of control. I wonder what would happen if such a rampage were to occur now?”

Seriously, what would happen? I can’t even begin to imagine what kind of an impact that might have.

I had a lot more mana now, I was better at controlling it, and my schtappe had evolved. But what if my emotions got the better of me? As I was pondering this, Sigiswald appeared to be contemplating something as well. After a long silence, he looked me in the eye and smiled.

“To put your fears to rest, Rozemyne, I will speak with my father about how we can help Ferdinand. I will devote my all to ensuring that he is not unjustly sentenced.”

“My... how delightful. I shall put my trust in you, Prince Sigiswald.”

Yesss! Now I shouldn’t need to worry about any of that “punishment by association” business. I did it, Ferdinand! This is bound to earn me a “very good” or two, right?

I victoriously clenched my fist. Meeting the bare minimum of

my requirements had put me in such a good mood that I wanted to hum, but our discussion was far from over. I tightened my expression, adjusted my posture, then swiftly moved on to the next of my conditions.

“To compensate for the fact that Ehrenfest has lost Ferdinand and will eventually lose me, the duchy will need new sources of mana. In that regard, I would advise the Zent to enforce a five-year rule: brides and grooms will only be allowed to marry *into* Ehrenfest. We will not lose even one more person to another duchy.”

Florencia had suggested that condition. Because of our rising rank and abundance of new trends, there were plenty of duchies that wanted to connect with us, and they were courting more and more of our students. We had ten Starbindings a year on average, and about half of those were with other duchies; we were bound to acquire a steady flow of new adults if we made marrying into Ehrenfest mandatory. Then, those married couples would presumably have children, making this a highly effective method for increasing the duchy’s population.

Marriages not involving the archducal family only required the permission of the relevant aubs, so Sigiswald gave me a brisk nod. “That suggestion will most likely be approved.”

“I would also like thirty to forty of the magic tools given to newborns. We have a glut of children who cannot become nobles for lack of one, and I would like to use this opportunity to raise them properly.”

“Thirty to forty?” Sigiswald repeated. “Is that not an unusually large number to ask for?” His smile deepened, perhaps to indicate that my request would prove both troublesome and expensive.

“Oh? Considering that this is a condition for the marriage, I think we were generous with our calculations. Ferdinand and I have such a wealth of mana that a mere thirty to forty mednobles will not even come close to compensating for our loss. Please stop to consider just how much harm the royal family is inflicting upon Ehrenfest.”

If we were given the magic tools I was requesting as well as a year to prepare, then Ehrenfest would presumably have enough mana even after my move to the Sovereignty.

“Furthermore,” I said, “could you perhaps instruct the Sovereign nobles from Ehrenfest to temporarily return home?”

That one was a request from Sylvester. As it stood, we weren't receiving any intelligence from the Sovereignty and other duchies. Justus had, uh... *somehow* managed to supply us in the past, but now that he was gone, we were running blind. We were having to rely on Clarissa for intelligence—which showed just how dire the situation was.

This should also be a good opportunity for me to meet the Sovereign nobles from Ehrenfest before I go to the Sovereignty myself.

Sylvester had refused, but the royal family had urged him to send more Ehrenfest nobles to the Sovereignty to strengthen my power base there. It was probably normal to pick retainers from among the Sovereignty's nobility to begin establishing a faction—and, with that thought, a wave of realization suddenly hit me. Would I even be able to see eye to eye with the Sovereign nobles? They had moved away during the height of Veronica's reign, whereas I had only ever known an Ehrenfest without her. I could already foresee us struggling to communicate. If we didn't meet and break the ice in advance of my adoption, then I would surely struggle to decide which of them I wanted in my retinue.

"That is precisely what we were hoping for as well," Sigiswald said joyously, immediately accepting another of my conditions. The royal family had apparently been troubled that so few of our Sovereign nobles wanted to return home. They would use our request as an excuse to send them back in the winter.

"Last of all, there are some personal conditions unrelated to Ehrenfest that I desire. Due to various circumstances, I have underage retainers who are name-sworn to me. I would ask for permission to bring them all with me, regardless of their age or status."

"Can you not wait until they come of age?" the prince asked, confused. "If your retainers are underage, then you will require permission from their parents. Plus, considering matters in the Royal Academy, it would be best for them to stay in Ehrenfest."

"Some of them no longer have parents," I replied, then explained what I wanted to be communicated to the Zent. "As their names and their lives are in my hands, I have more authority over them than their parents would. Anything they do requires my permission, and there is a reason why they cannot be left in Ehrenfest without me. You may ask Aub Ehrenfest for the details."

I decided to leave it at that, then took a deep breath; this next

condition was one that I absolutely could not afford to lose. I sat up straight, which made Sigiswald do the same. He was still wearing a smile, but I could see that he was tensing up slightly.

I gave the prince the most intense look I could manage. "This is my most significant condition, and one that I absolutely cannot budge on. If you wish to marry me, Prince Sigiswald, then there is something that you must pay very close attention to."

"And what might that be?"

In my most forceful voice, I said, "I desire the freedom to enter any library or book room within the Sovereignty, and permission to read all of the documents within them, in part to obtain information not available in the underground archive. I also want a book room in my villa."

Sigiswald was silent for a few seconds; then he put on a rigid smile. "A book room in your villa, you say...? One separate from the royal library?"

"In truth, I agreed to marry Wilfried and become Ehrenfest's first wife in return for complete control over the duchy's book rooms. Anyone I marry *must* give me a library. If you are to be my husband, Prince Sigiswald, then you must put a book room in the villa I am given. My dream proposal involves my husband-to-be showing me a library he built just for me, and the countless books he collected to fill it." I smiled. "You *do* wish to marry me, do you not?"

He nodded. "I am glad that you are being so open-minded about our union."

Buddy... I can see you twitching.

"Incidentally..." Sigiswald continued, "this book room you desire—how large do you expect it to be?"

"Larger than the one in Ehrenfest's castle, but... I would not mind it being larger than the one Ferdinand owned."

"Ferdinand...?"

"Indeed," I replied with a firm nod. "He entrusted to me his estate and a vast collection of books before leaving for Ahrensbach. Now, here I am marrying a prince; would it be wrong to expect a greater gift than the one given to me by my guardian? It must be simple enough for the royal family to create a book room larger than one that belonged to a member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Eheheh..."

I started going into detail about Ferdinand's book room,

describing its dimensions and the number of books inside... and the smile slowly vanished from Sigiswald's face.

Hm? Wait... is this a lot to ask of a prince?

"U-Um... if you think that my request for a book room in my villa is too unreasonable, then you could give me the royal library instead. Living in a library has always been a dream of mine. I look forward to seeing what you, as my future husband, will gift me."

I gave the prince my sweetest smile yet, trying to indicate that this was his chance to butter me up... but he merely stared at me in a daze and muttered, "Am I truly going to marry this girl...?"

Hm? You were the one who brought it up, were you not? Hmm? Am I mistaken or something?

I cocked my head at him and decided to ask for confirmation. It would be hugely embarrassing if I was operating under a misconception of some kind.

"You *did* say that you wished to marry me for the benefit of the royal family... right?" I asked. "Did I mishear you or something?"

"No, not at all. I am simply, um... How shall I put this? Surprised...? For the benefit of the royal family... Yes, that is true. But are you truly satisfied with the idea?"

At last, something had compelled him to ask me how *I* felt about all this. This was my only opportunity to be honest, so I decided to speak the truth.

"I am not at all interested in becoming the wife of a man whose second marriage I blessed as High Bishop... but if this is my duty as the king's adopted daughter, then I will accept my fate. That is why I am requesting at least a library—to help protect my sanity."

My engagement to Wilfried was the same. There was nothing I could do but accept my guardians' will; it wasn't an environment in which I could simply do as I pleased.

"*At least* a library..." Prince Sigiswald repeated, a distant look in his eye. He certainly didn't seem like someone who had gotten his wish after speaking about it so passionately. But why? I didn't understand.

Well, putting that aside...

"That concludes my honest thoughts and conditions," I said. "I will leave the actual decision-making to Aub Ehrenfest and the Zent. Please be careful when discussing these matters with the royal family—once I am adopted, my hope is that we can all stay on good terms for years to come."

Secured Conditions

After my private meeting with Sigiswald, I explained to Sylvester and the others what the royal family had told me: namely, that they had thought they were treating Ehrenfest especially well. There had been plenty of misunderstandings at work between us, but they hadn't simply wanted to dump the entire burden on us, so I believed there was still room for negotiation.

Next, I reported that the royal family was going to hold another Dedication Ritual on the last day of the Archduke Conference, and that I had put forward our conditions, assuming they wanted to adopt me on good terms. I also made sure to mention my repeated reminders that I was merely expressing my own opinions and that the aub had the final say—I wanted Sylvester and the others to recognize my efforts to avoid a repeat of the mess last year.

Sylvester must have been irritated that, after failing to secure his agreement, the royal family had attempted to go behind his back by obtaining my approval instead; he praised me for blocking them and stressing that the final decision was not mine to make.

Not long after my debrief, Sylvester received another summons from the royal family. He was to meet with them again in two days' time.

"Alright, Rozemyne," Sylvester said upon his return, "tell me *exactly* how you negotiated with the royal family." We were in a meeting room without Florencia or his retainers, and he looked unmistakably angry for some reason. His eyes narrowed, he started grinding a finger into my cheek.

"Pooley...?"

"No! This time, we had our meeting without retainers so that we could speak more clearly—and guess what I discovered. You were unbelievably rude to Prince Sigiswald in the archive, weren't you?"

I cocked my head at Sylvester, unsure why he was scolding me. "I told you that I was blunt with Prince Sigiswald, since he

promised not to punish me for stating my opinion. Was he really so wounded that he found it necessary to complain to you? That's not very manly of him."

"No, he wasn't complaining. He wanted me to warn you not to take the same tone with anyone else, since he was confident you would. The stress of listening to him made my stomach ache."

So he really isn't manly.

If we had agreed to speak as nobles, then even I would have had the common sense to be more discreet. Sigiswald had *told me* to be blunt, so it was kind of messed up that he was now complaining about it.

"To return to your original request," I said, "yes, I did push for the royal family to host another Dedication Ritual. That was only to buy us some time, though, and I don't believe I did much else that could be described as negotiating. Bear in mind that I do not have the authority to make any actual decisions. At most, you could say that I threatened them a little to ensure they would spare Ferdinand."

"Hold on just a moment!" Sylvester exclaimed, his hands on his head in disbelief. "I just assured Prince Sigiswald that you *didn't* threaten him—that he must have misunderstood you, since you would never resort to such means. But he was right?!"

I felt kind of bad knowing that Sylvester had worked so hard to defend me, but... indeed, the prince was correct. My threats were entirely deliberate.

"No matter how much concern I show for Ferdinand, nobody in Ahrensbach will treat him as family. Prince Anastasius even told me that I would need to take matters into my own hands. Asking the royal family to help him through normal means did not work, so I was forced to make use of the rare opportunity that the archive afforded me. Had that conversation taken place anywhere else, in the presence of others, I would have been executed. Is that not true?"

Being in the archive had allowed me to speak my mind. Of course, if my efforts ended in failure, I would need to think of some other means to accomplish my goal.

"In any case," Sylvester said, "the royal family understood you loud and clear, so you don't need to worry about it anymore."

Hope welled up in my heart. "They accepted my requests for Ferdinand to receive better living conditions and not be deemed

guilty by association?”

Sylvester responded with a tired nod. “Yeah. They said they would order Ahrensbach to give him a hidden room.”

“Yesss! And the other conditions?”

“They approved more or less every single one. In a way... I’m pretty sure that’s all thanks to you.”

He went on to tell me how the rest of the meeting had proceeded. The first time he was summoned, they had only used an area-affecting sound-blocking magic tool, but this time they had spoken alone, without any attendants or guards present, and used individual sound-blockers. Then, in this extremely contained environment, the thoroughly exhausted royal family had gone through my conditions, made sure that they were accurate and properly understood, then confirmed that everyone was on the same page.

Sylvester continued, “As far as I can tell, the royal family is pretty divided when it comes to how to deal with you.”

Trauerqual, for example, believed that anyone who obtained the Grutrissheit deserved to become the next Zent, and that they would need to be obeyed without question. In his eyes, preparing a villa and such for me was an absurd misplacement of priorities; he instead maintained that I should be welcomed into the royal palace as the country’s next queen while *he* moved into a villa instead.

“He also believes that one is best served making one’s own faction,” Sylvester informed me, “and that Zents need to surround themselves with people they can trust. That is precisely why he opened our first meeting with an offering to accept as many Ehrenfest nobles into the Sovereignty as possible—and was shocked when we declined.”

There was also the matter of my marriage. Everyone knew that engagements were a crucial means of creating new factions, so while Trauerqual wanted to adopt me for the sake of obtaining the Grutrissheit, he would refrain from getting involved afterward. He apparently believed that the new Zent should rule Yurgenschmidt as they saw fit.

“That all sounds very nice,” I replied, “but would that not boil down to King Trauerqual dumping his burden on me?”

“Prince Sigiswald seemed to feel the same way. He said that simply obtaining the Grutrissheit wouldn’t be enough for someone to rule.”

Because I was from Ehrenfest, I wouldn't have much authority to speak of, nor would I be able to rely on the greater duchies to help me. I doubted that Trauerqual would do much to support me either, since he was so against getting involved with my rule. These facts had spurred Sigiswald to ask a very important question: How much could a mere student really be expected to do with just the Grutrissheit? Abandoning me to rule on my own wasn't an option. That was why he had instead proposed that I marry into the royal family after my adoption; it would introduce the least discord, allowing me to depend on them as well as their existing support base.

Even then, Trauerqual had refused to budge. "Your position is sound, but we do not have the final say on this matter," he had said. "The next Zent must decide our fates."

"You agreed with Prince Sigiswald, I'm told," Sylvester remarked to me.

"I simply believe that, if they're willing to accept my terms, marrying him is the least I can do."

According to Sylvester—and perhaps unsurprisingly—Anastasius had disagreed with both his father's and brother's positions. "He said that obtaining the Grutrissheit and the authority of a Zent would not give you the political aptitude necessary to rule a country. Until then, he had seemed to be of one mind with Prince Sigiswald, but after that..."

"Yes? What did he say?"

"Well, er... In his words: 'We cannot entrust Yurgenschmidt to such a book-obsessed, maladapted gremlin. Her temple-born customs would clash with our own, and society would descend into chaos. For all our sakes, we must take the Grutrissheit from her as soon as possible.' Let me tell you, King Trauerqual dragged him over the coals for that."

"I mean, that was rude... but he's not wrong."

Anastasius had gone on to say that, if taking the Grutrissheit from me was an option, he would ease the country's frustrations toward Ehrenfest by having me serve the Sovereign temple as its High Bishop until my coming of age. Then, he would allow me to return home. If taking the Grutrissheit from me *wasn't* an option, he would propose that they hide my status as Zent, make me Sigiswald's third wife, and confine me to a library whenever my assistance wasn't needed. That, he had said, would be the most

peaceful solution.

In response, Trauerqual had scolded Anastasius for being so disrespectful to the next Zent and subsequently forbidden him from speaking to me in the underground archive.

“King Trauerqual stated that he would do his utmost to follow Ehrenfest’s requests,” Sylvester said, “but he also very apologetically asked if you could, as the next Zent, be more considerate of the Sovereignty’s budget and the state of its treasury.”

“Is that somehow relevant to Ehrenfest...?”

Sylvester glared at me. “You asked for your own extravagant book room, didn’t you?”

In a shocking twist, the book room I’d requested would cost an absolute fortune, and the royal family was agonizing over what to do. The other conditions had been trivially easy to meet in comparison.

“Your book room was the only condition that the royal family could not agree to,” Sylvester continued. “So, Ehrenfest agreed to give up on it.”

“NOOOOOO! You gave up the one thing I told you I wasn’t going to budge on?! That’s so mean! MY BOOK ROOOOOOM!”

I screamed until there was no more air in my lungs, then clutched my head, started gasping for breath, and glared at Sylvester with tears in my eyes. I’d worked so hard during my meeting with Sigiswald, but he hadn’t figured out what mattered to me most.

Sigiswald... you colossal dummy!

“Quiet down, Rozemyne. It was a decision to be made between the Zent and me. Accept it. You said that you would obey any conclusions we came to, did you not?”

“GAAA! I *DID* SAY THAT!”

That makes me the colossal dummy!

“They’ll allow you to visit the palace library and their various archives as you please, so it’s not like you won’t have any books at all. Plus, the other conditions were far more important than you getting to have your own book room. We can thank your ridiculous request for the fact that they were all accepted, but come on. Give it up. The royal family looked completely drained.”

Sigiswald had arrived at the underground archive expecting a classy conversation with a noble, only to come face-to-face with an

unwavering merchant and receive a firm dressing-down for not being on the same page as Ehrenfest. The encounter had apparently made him lose confidence in how other people saw the royals, among other things, and the report he had subsequently delivered to his family had made them all cradle their heads in agony.

The royal family had clear reasons and public-facing excuses to hold a Dedication Ritual on the last day of the Archduke Conference. They also had handwritten instructions detailing how to perform it—courtesy of yours truly—so their only concern would need to be changing everybody’s schedule. Even then, they had so very much to gain from the ritual that it was worth being a little bit pushy to make it happen.

Still, there was only so much that the royal family could manage. Ehrenfest’s demands had largely made sense, given its situation, and our request for Ferdinand to receive better living conditions hadn’t been too unreasonable either. My book room was the sole exception; it simply wasn’t feasible, no matter how they tried to approach it.

“In the first place, what were you even thinking by asking for your own book room?”

“Hm? Is it not normal to have one in one’s home?”

There were book rooms in Ehrenfest’s temple and castle, and the Ehrenfest Dormitory had a dedicated reading corner. Ferdinand also had a library in his estate—though that was now “Myne” to love and to cherish. A villa fit for the adopted daughter of a king would surely have a book room, at the very least.

“Leaving Ehrenfest would require me to give up the library that Ferdinand gave me, would it not?” I asked. “Was it really that strange that I wanted a new one as compensation? It seems unthinkable that the quality of one’s life should worsen after being adopted by the king.”

“Aah... It makes my head ache that you equate the quality of your life to books, but in any case—they’ll prepare somewhere for you to store the books you already own. Just take whatever you want from Ferdinand’s library.”

“Excuse me? It’s *my* library! The handover has already taken place, thank you very much.”

“Whatever.” Sylvester waved away my complaint, uninterested. “Just don’t drain the country’s budget with your book-related demands.”

"I never intended to. If a newly made library was too much to ask for, then I would have been fine with Prince Sigiswald giving me his. That was what Ferdinand did, right? I just want new books to read—my future husband allowing me to share his would suffice, even. The shelves could easily have been filled with transcriptions of the palace library's books, so..."

"Ferdinand, are *you* the reason she's like this...?" Sylvester muttered to himself, shaking his head. He then looked straight at me and said, "Rozemyne, a little tip: very few people own as many books as Ferdinand once did. Prince Sigiswald, for example, only borrows books from the palace library—he's never bought one to keep. Can you imagine, then, how many books the royal family would have needed to buy to fulfill your request? Trying to match Ferdinand's collection would bankrupt Yurgenschmidt."

The strength drained from my body. I wouldn't obtain *any* new books from moving to the Sovereignty.

"This is awful. Just awful," I groaned. "How can that man call himself a prince when he doesn't own a single book? He's crushing the dreams of little girls everywhere! On top of that, he already has two wives. How am I supposed to make my heart throb for him?! I mean, he can't even make a single library to propose to me with!"

"The heck are you saying?" Sylvester griped. He was baffled, but this was a matter of grave importance.

"Wilfried told me I could do as I pleased with the Ehrenfest Dormitory's bookshelf. Wilfried! Yet *an actual prince* can't promise me a single book. I can't believe I'm having to give up on my book room, even after I suggested moving into the palace library."

The quality of my life wasn't the only thing on the decline—so was the quality of my fiancés. This was a nightmare. It had never even crossed my mind that being adopted into the royal family would cost me so much.

"I'm stunned," I said. "Depressed, even. Prince Sigiswald is the biggest disappointment of my life."

In an instant, my scant few reasons to be optimistic about moving to the Sovereignty had been completely obliterated. I had planned to spend the next year devoted to my handover duties, content in the knowledge that a new book room awaited me, but now my motivation was swirling down the drain. Swoooooosh.

"I'll still go, since they promised to improve Ferdinand's living conditions and spare him from punishment, but... I don't want to."

A deep sigh escaped me. "To think I'm going to lose my library..."

"Drop it already. They might not provide any books, but they'll at least make the room for you. And you have that book deposit system, right? We'll send you the ones we make here, and your shelves will start filling up in no time. What's the difference?"

My move would introduce a considerable delay between the books being made and them ending up in my hands. In other words, I was still going to be worse off. How was he unable to grasp something so simple?

"Anyway, that's enough about books," Sylvester said. "What's done is done. We need to discuss the other decisions that were made. Listen closely, since this is going to determine how you should approach these things." His unilateral decision to move the conversation along frustrated me, but there was nothing I could do; no amount of complaining from me would change an agreement made between the king and an archduke.

My shoulders slumped, I could only allow Sylvester to continue.

"The royal family will oversee another Dedication Ritual, as you suggested. Then, with a surplus of mana under their belts, King Trauerqual and Prince Sigiswald will spend the next year trying to obtain the Grutrissheit. If their attempts end in failure, they will adopt you as planned."

Not even the slightest trace of a smile remained on my face. "If they do obtain the Grutrissheit without us, will they still meet our requests...?"

"As payment for our help in the underground archive, they will grant Ferdinand a hidden room and ensure that he is not punished alongside his fiancée. That's all, though. And, uh... while they're going to make an attempt on their own, they expect it to be a formidable task, if not an impossible one. King Trauerqual is only encouraging it because he believes the royal family shouldn't rest on its laurels and expect a student from another duchy to do everything for them."

Well, if our Ferdinand-related conditions were still going to be met, that was fine with me. I didn't want to move to the Sovereignty in the first place, so their resolve was much appreciated.

So much so that I want to shower them with ultra-nasty rejuvenation potions. I won't actually do that, though. They may be effective, but I would definitely be suspected of an attempted poisoning.

“There’s a lot of groundwork to be laid,” Sylvester informed me, “so our next year is going to be spent preparing. As things stand, I will need to disown you during the next Archduke Conference, at which point the king will adopt you instead. On the surface, we will maintain the status quo, but Ehrenfest and the royal family will actually be getting ready for said exchange.” He lowered his voice and said, “Is that understood?”

I nodded; that we needed to keep this adoption a secret was a forgone conclusion. It was good, then, that Ehrenfest had already taken complete control of its information network, making it much easier for us to keep to ourselves and work in the shadows. We would manage.

Sylvester continued, “I plan to clear the room of retainers when we discuss this back in Ehrenfest. We can decide who to tell after that.”

“We will need to inform Melchior’s and my retainers, as well as those in the temple. The handover and their future plans will require some deliberation. Oh, and when will we tell the Gutenbergs? How will we teach their technologies to the Sovereignty? Will they only need to visit, as per usual, or will they actually have to move there? We will need to give them plenty of notice, else the burden will prove too great.” My next year was sure to be spent managing the temple, the Gutenbergs, and my personnel.

“I don’t expect things to be easy for the Gutenbergs, but can that stuff not wait until you’ve been adopted and gotten things ready for your craftspeople? You’re always on my back about not rushing the commoners.”

“I will discuss it with Benno and decide from there. In any case, we will need to approach the Sovereign scholars and ensure that the necessary documents are sent as soon as possible. In the meantime, would you grant me permission to share retainers with Melchior, which you refused to permit before? I am suffering a severe lack of archknights at the Royal Academy.”

Simply traveling between the dormitory and the auditorium was fine with my current squad, but I would need archknights to visit the underground archive, and I wanted as much time to educate Melchior’s retainers as I could get.

“It’ll depend on Melchior’s answer, but... eh, sure. By the way... although we’ll be acting as though nothing’s changed for the next

year, how do you feel about Wilfried now that you'll no longer be engaged to him?"

Despite my best attempts to avoid them, my thoughts about Wilfried came to mind. "To be honest, I don't feel anything about our engagement coming to an end. We were always more like siblings than a couple, and we've barely even interacted in quite some time. He didn't even appreciate the *ordonnances* I sent him. Above all else, though, we haven't done any of the rituals necessary for an engagement."

We hadn't traded feystones, and we had decided not to start color-mixing until we were a bit older. In short, our engagement had been a verbal agreement with the king's approval and nothing more. Sigiswald was going to replace Wilfried, sure, but that was pretty much the only change; I wasn't emotionally invested in either political marriage, nor was I romantically interested in either of my suitors.

"However," I continued, "I do recognize that this change of plans will impact Wilfried. His engagement to me was the only reason that so many chose to overlook his connection to Lady Veronica and the fact that he entered the Ivory Tower. I regret that the future he spent so long working toward is going to be shattered out of the blue, and as the result of a royal decree he has no power to overturn."

"Yeah..." Sylvester muttered in agreement, the picture of a father worrying for his son. He wasn't thinking about me at all, and that realization made me sigh.

"But you're aware that Wilfried won't be the only one having to endure the life-changing consequences of a royal decree, right? I never intended to leave Ehrenfest, yet here I am, at risk of losing all of my belongings and everyone who's precious to me. And don't forget Ferdinand, who's gone through that already. Wilfried, on the other hand, will get to stay in Ehrenfest. You need only look after him as his father."

Wilfried would at least get to stay with his loving family—and that was enough to make me envy him. There was a pregnant pause before Sylvester replied:

"You're right."

A few days later, an invitation from the royal family arrived, and Sylvester formally announced the Dedication Ritual that was

going to be held on the last day of the conference. The nobles let out joyous cries upon hearing that they would no longer need to endure pressure from the other duchies, but they were also surprised to have been ordered to participate as well in order to gain more divine protections; very few of them had participated in a religious ceremony before.

“Rozemyne’s retainers,” Sylvester said, “I expect you to be there in your blue robes, supporting and protecting everyone throughout the ritual.”

“Understood.”

We would only need to show up and perform the ritual on the specified date, so there was nothing for us to prepare. I needed only to continue visiting the underground archive until the last day of the Archduke Conference.

“So, the royal family is hosting a Dedication Ritual...”

Hannelore said during lunch. “I am told that it was made possible thanks to Ehrenfest, who wished to answer the calls of the other duchies and teach them about religious ceremonies. Even we of Dunkelfelger are thrilled to be participating. Ehrenfest must be finding it difficult.”

“I admit,” I replied, “I did not expect Dunkelfelger to take part. Your research has already demonstrated that one can obtain divine protections through the ceremonies performed before and after ditter games.”

“We are interested in other religious ceremonies as well, it would seem. There are only so many divine protections we can obtain through our ditter rituals, no?”

That surprised me. Maybe this was rude, but I’d never expected those from Dunkelfelger to care about anything other than ditter.

Because, I mean, they’re always going on about it, right? So, like... Yeah.

According to Hannelore, the scholars and attendants wanted divine protections from other gods as well. “We also want our adults to have another chance to perform the divine protections ritual. My father and mother are currently agonizing over how to involve our laynobles and mednobles as well, despite them not usually being able to attend the Archduke Conference.”

Magdalena nodded in agreement—she was listening too—while Hildebrand bemoaned the fact that he could not participate in the

ritual.

“Hannelore will not be able to participate this year either,” Magdalena said chidingly. “Some have suggested that it be incorporated into the Royal Academy’s lesson plan, and that Klassenberg and Ehrenfest perform it annually as joint research. Be patient until you enroll.”

“By then, it will already be too late...” Hildebrand grumbled, his lips pursed.

“Will the majority of duchies be participating in the ritual, as one might expect?” Hannelore asked.

Magdalena nodded. “Indeed. Ahrensbach has declined, as they have Ferdinand to teach them, but every other duchy has announced its intention to take part.”

I remembered Ferdinand writing that he had traveled around Ahrensbach with a group of nobles for Spring Prayer. Simply having experience with religious ceremonies wouldn’t be enough, though; if one wanted new divine protections, they would need to repeat the divine protections ritual.

“Would it not be wise for them to participate anyway?” I asked with a quizzical tilt of my head. “Most nobles simply want a chance to obtain new divine protections.”

Magdalena gave me a cold smile, as if she were holding back some much darker emotions. “According to Lady Detlinde, they will be able to repeat ‘that trifling ritual’ as many times as they desire once she becomes Zent.”

“Did she actually say that?! Really?!”

“Three times, courtesy of her ordonnanz. Her retainers’ desperate attempts to stop her were included in the recording as well, but in any case, the entire royal family was present for it.”

AAAAAAH! It might have required me to threaten a prince, but I’m so glad that I managed to save Ferdinand.

The Archduke Conference's Dedication Ritual

Hirschur made a rare appearance at the Ehrenfest Dormitory and gave me a board, on which was a list of all the ingredients necessary to make mobile magic tools like Schwartz and Weiss. "Lady Rozemyne, I will be participating in the Dedication Ritual," she said, sounding extra pleased with herself. "Do give the aub my thanks." Her announcement had nothing to do with the board, so I wasn't sure whether to thank her or play along.

"Thank you ever so much for delivering this," I eventually replied. "I am also glad to hear that you have been allowed to join the ritual."

The first Dedication Ritual we hosted at the Royal Academy was for research purposes, so only archduke candidates and student archscholars had been allowed to participate. This had deeply troubled the research-crazy professors, who were very much interested in religious ceremonies that allowed one to gain more divine protections.

At first, the news that another Dedication Ritual was going to take place had come as another disappointment to the professors; only the aubs and their retainers had received invitations. Hirschur had grumbled about being left out again; then she had gotten Sylvester to send an ordonnanz to the royal family requesting that they include the professors as well.

I didn't think the royal family would mind. The more participants, the better, after all.

"I am aware that participants were asked to bring their own rejuvenation potions this time," Hirschur remarked. "Gundolf was rather frustrated. The students had said that Ehrenfest's potions were particularly effective, so he wanted to try one for himself."

I giggled. Just as I predicted, Drewanchel was thinking about our rejuvenation potions first and foremost.

All of a sudden, I noticed a twinkle in Hirschur's eye. "The

royal family wants to make this ceremony a yearly event, but the promise of divine protections and nothing more will surely lead to mounting dissatisfaction.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

“Although having a chance to perform the ritual once every ten years is fine in itself, one will need to obtain several divine protections before they feel an impact on their mana usage. One must continually offer mana during the ceremony to earn the right to repeat the ritual, but those who receive their chance during the first or second year will receive barely any divine protections.”

Hirschur was correct; how many divine protections one obtained was dependent on how much mana one offered and whether one’s regular behavior drew the attention of the gods. It wasn’t enough to perform the odd ritual and then proceed with one’s everyday life. If one considered the number of protections received by my retainers, who were visiting the temple every day as part of a silly competition to see who could transform their schtappe into a divine instrument first, and the number of protections received by Wilfried, who had performed Spring Prayer and offered mana to the foundation since I first entered a jureve five years ago, it became clear that quantity and consistency were tremendously important.

She continued, “It will most likely be the losing duchies who are made to repeat their rituals first. Their mana is sparse to begin with, and they are unlikely to obtain many divine protections after their first ritual. Then, they will need to wait an entire decade before they can repeat it again, locked into participating over and over for fear of getting left behind. All those years of struggling will doubtless inspire frustration—and so, Lady Rozemyne! Do you not think you should distribute rejuvenation potions to ease their burden and turn their painful struggle into a more tolerable one?”

I considered Hirschur’s point. It did seem like a good idea to provide an immediate reward to ease the nobles’ inevitable dissatisfaction.

“If you believe this is important, Professor Hirschur, then I would advise you to say as much to the royal family and suggest that the Sovereign professors work together to make those rejuvenation potions,” I said, turning her down with a polite smile. “At least one of you must have a recipe for a highly effective brew. This is not a problem that Ehrenfest must strive to solve.”

Hirschur shrugged, unamused. “You are correct that making rejuvenation potions for the defeated duchies would not be beneficial in the slightest. I would never waste time that I could spend researching on such a fruitless endeavor.”

“I agree from the bottom of my heart. Just as you would not want to surrender your chances to be immersed in your precious research, why would I want to fritter away time that I could spend reading? Furthermore, the royal family are the ones holding this ritual. I would not like to intervene.”

Hirschur let out a laugh. “So you claim, but it is clear as day that you are devising a solution to their discontent. It would not be the first time you have done something of no apparent value to you. On that note... a rather large change is being made to the Royal Academy’s curriculum. You inspired that as well, I imagine? You would do well to understand that your words move the royal family. At this rate, they will want to take you for themselves.”

Her warning had come too late, but it was a good indication that news of my adoption had yet to circulate.

“How are the lesson plans changing?” I asked.

“The royal family declared that it would make more sense to obtain one’s schtappe *after* learning mana compression and obtaining divine protections. They wanted a return to the old ways, when students would need to wait until the year of their graduation, but were forced to compromise when an overwhelming number of duchies proclaimed that they would rather the younger generation learn to use their schtappes at the Royal Academy than at home. Thus, students will now obtain them during their third year.”

As it turned out, the students obtaining their schtappes sooner made lessons easier for the teachers, so they hadn’t protested the event being moved to the first year. Hirschur suspected my involvement because the topic had come up so abruptly and during the second half of the Archduke Conference.

Ngh! As much as it hurts, her deduction is spot-on!

Hirschur continued, “We were also instructed to revert our lesson plans for the first- and second-years to what they were before. Gundolf’s group is overseeing this, with plans to have the process completed in time for the next academic year.”

The professors had initially opposed this schedule, arguing that lesson plans couldn’t be changed at such short notice—but Fraularm

had already set a precedent for using the old plans during our second year, so their hands had ultimately been tied.

Oh? I guess there are times when Professor Fraularm's little schemes actually benefit the royal family.

"There was also an inquiry into whether the Dedication Ritual could be added to the standard curriculum," Hirschur informed me. "At the moment, many duchies still struggle to visit the temple, but the royal family stated that a degree of competition must be introduced at once. They want the students to experience plenty of religious ceremonies and pray as much as possible during class so that they can obtain more divine protections."

This suggestion had actually been rejected, since the professors knew next to nothing about religious ceremonies. In the end, it was decided that the new content would be incorporated into the curriculum gradually over a much longer period—and that Ehrenfest and Klassenberg would continue to perform joint research focused on the Dedication Ritual.

"Once the term begins, Ehrenfest will be asked to participate in this joint research, I imagine. It is also my understanding that Klassenberg is helping the royal family get ready for the upcoming ritual so that they may learn the process and make their own preparations in the future."

Klassenberg and the royal family both act fast, though I can't imagine Ehrenfest will ask for much. I received a report earlier today that we brought a trial set of our picture-book bibles to the Royal Academy and started promoting them.

And then it hit me—I had said in the past that Ehrenfest would not have any qualms about repeating the ritual as long as Klassenberg took care of the preparations.

Hirschur gave me a look of understanding. "Ah, I see. So this had already been discussed. It was mentioned that the burden on Klassenberg would plummet when the ritual does eventually become part of the curriculum and duchies start bringing their own rejuvenation potions. Oh, regarding the potions—you may be interested to know that Klassenberg was suspicious of the apparent ease with which Ehrenfest prepared so many."

Preparing rejuvenation potions certainly is a handful.

Just making them was draining enough, but the biggest complication was gathering the materials. Ehrenfest's gathering spot hadn't used to be very abundant, and it seemed reasonable to

assume that the other duchies were still dealing with the same problem.

They could just regenerate their own gathering spots, but you need to know the prayer for that, so...

As I pondered this, Lieseleta entered with a warm meal packaged neatly in a box—our way of thanking Hirschur for actually bringing the board to me and providing so much additional information. She tried to stand near the wall and wait for us to finish our conversation, but the overeager professor gestured her over without delay.

“Lieseleta, if you would,” she said, then immediately took the box with a smile. “If you’ll excuse me, then, I must return to my laboratory.”

“U-Um, Professor Hirschur...” I stammered. “There are still things I must ask you about—”

“Good day to you, Lady Rozemyne. May we meet again during the Archduke Conference’s Dedication Ritual.”

Having obtained her food, Hirschur turned on her heel and swiftly departed, not even bothering to conclude our discussion. I was left in a daze, which made Lieseleta slump her shoulders.

“My apologies, Lady Rozemyne... I did not think she would beat such a hasty retreat. I should have taken longer to prepare her food.”

“I cannot blame you for failing to realize her intentions. Professor Hirschur may teach here at the Royal Academy, but she never behaves as a noble normally should.” Not even I had expected her to leave so abruptly. She was too much of a free spirit.

“I thank you ever so much for your consolation, Lady Rozemyne, but I have known Professor Hirschur for years now. It was my failure as an attendant that I did not anticipate what she was going to do. That was such a crucial opportunity for you to gather information as well...”

I get how you feel, but Hirschur is outright unpredictable. Attendants aren’t mind readers, so what can you do?

I continued to translate in the underground archive, then spent lunch with Magdalena, discussing the royal family’s Dedication Ritual. In no time at all, it was the final day of the Archduke Conference. Despite the suddenness of the whole affair, everything was made ready without incident.

After breakfast, I cleansed myself, changed into my High Bishop robes, then went with my blue-robed retainers to a specified waiting room, where we would await the beginning of the ritual.

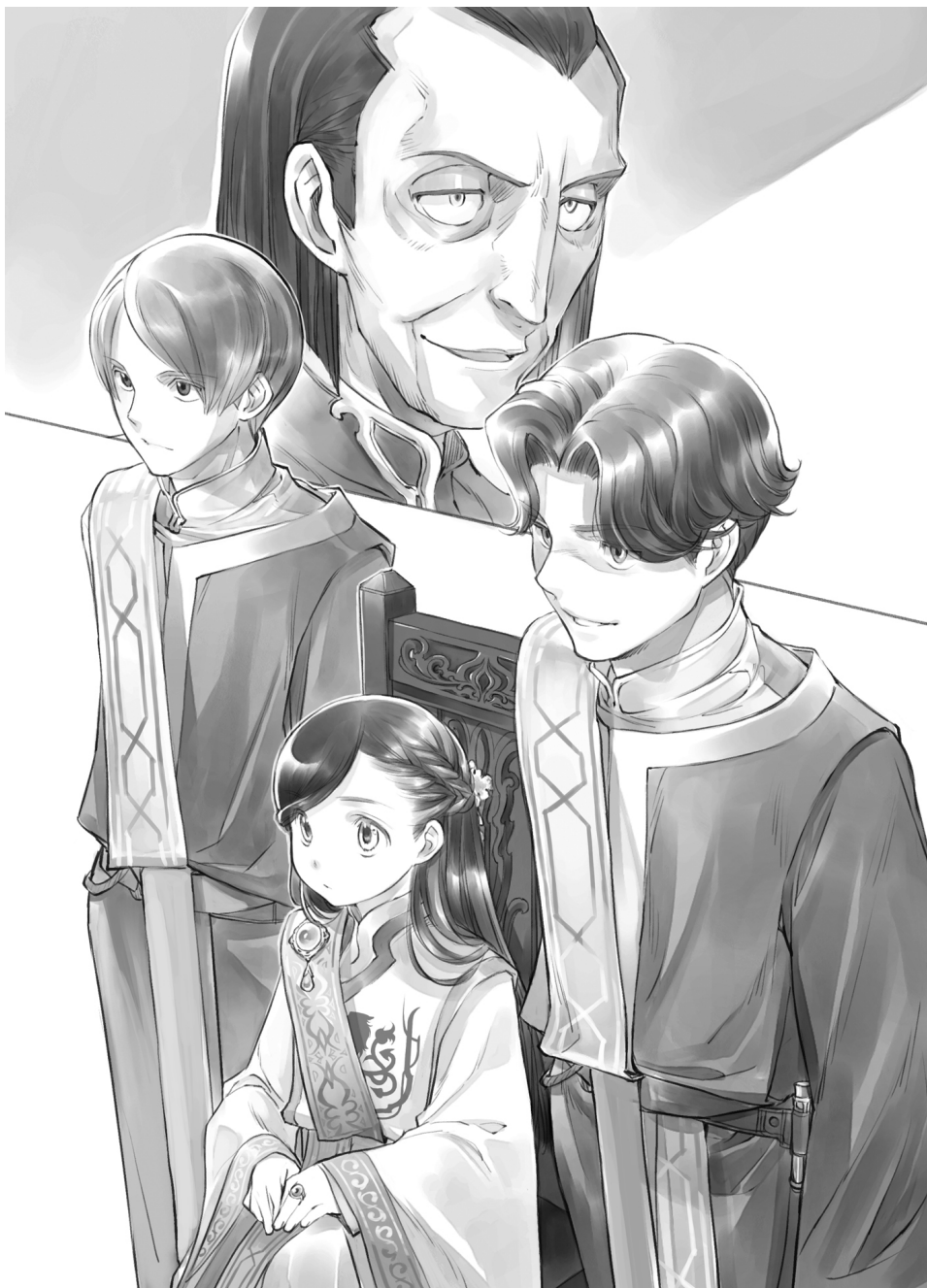
Geh. It's Immanuel.

No sooner had we entered the room than we found ourselves face-to-face with the Sovereign High Priest. I recalled his attempt to cut us off after the Starbind Ceremony and was struck with a sudden urge to step away from him out of disgust, but Cornelius placed a hand on my shoulder to keep me in place. He then moved me just a bit to the side, behind Hartmut.

I gazed up at Cornelius, who gave me a small, reassuring smile in response. He then adopted a more neutral expression and stood next to Hartmut. They both stared down Immanuel, with whom I exchanged the usual greetings before we took the seats offered to us.

“Lady Rozemyne,” the Sovereign High Priest said, “I am beyond grateful that we will soon welcome you as our Sovereign High Bishop.”

Hartmut shook his head. “As we have mentioned, Lady Rozemyne is an Ehrenfest archduke candidate. There are no plans for her to join the Sovereign temple. She is here only to carry out a request from the royal family.” He then directed the man a chilly smile that practically screamed, “Get this through your thick skull already.”



“Soon after this ceremony concludes, I expect Ehrenfest to receive a royal decree,” Immanuel said, his lips curling. “One instructing Lady Rozemyne to be sent to the Sovereign temple to serve as its High Bishop, that is. As I understand it, there *do* exist methods to move an archduke candidate to the Sovereignty—and there will not be anything that Ehrenfest can do to stop it.”

Hartmut looked momentarily surprised, then smirked provocatively. “By law, the only way for an archduke candidate to be moved to the Sovereignty is through marriage—but someone who is married cannot become the High Bishop. Were you unaware of that fact, despite being a Sovereign priest? Even if she *does* move, she will never enter your temple. Ah... Perhaps those of the royal family intend to take her for themselves?”

Immanuel clearly had a limited understanding of noble culture; he had only learned that archduke candidates couldn’t normally be taken into the Sovereignty through a conversation with Ferdinand. He stared at us in wide-eyed shock and muttered, “The royal family intends to take her...?” He had genuinely believed that I would start serving as the Sovereign High Bishop once the royal family took action.

I mean, they do have ways to cancel my adoption in Ehrenfest, and they did speak to the Sovereign temple about me joining its ranks... Perhaps he genuinely thought he had a good chance of winning.

Midway through the Archduke Conference, however, it had come to light that I was a Zent candidate on the verge of acquiring the Grutrissheit. The royal family’s focus had then shifted to adopting me instead. They had probably forgotten all about the Sovereign temple.

Everything really did change over the span of this conference.

“Immanuel, you should go to the auditorium,” I said. “You will need to tell the nobles how to enter and arrange themselves, no?” I tried to wave him away—his staring contest with Hartmut was starting to get annoying—but he instead chose to stay and tell me his complaints about today’s ceremony.

“Lady Rozemyne, the Dedication Ceremony is meant to be performed while facing the shrine, not with everyone standing in a circle. Please ask the royal family to reposition the participating nobles.”

Indeed, it was standard practice when making an offering to the gods to face the shrine, as the dedicated mana would then flow into the divine instruments on the altar. Unfortunately for Immanuel, that was not our intention for today. We needed the mana for our own purposes, so the nobles involved were to kneel around chalices instead.

He continued, "Filling all of the divine instruments will be of enormous benefit to the Sovereign temple."

"I have absolutely no intention of providing mana to the Sovereign temple," I retorted. "Harvests all across the country have worsened specifically because you took each duchy's best blue priests and shrine maidens—is that not true? Well, in this case, I think the Sovereign temple should return the favor."

After the civil war, the return of the more plenteous apprentices to noble society had caused trouble enough, but the Sovereign temple's poaching had really wounded the temples of the country's lesser duchies. The state of the blue priests who were left in Ehrenfest said it all.

"In any case," I went on, "if you truly want the mana from the duchies here today to be given to the Sovereign temple, consult the royal family. They are the ones hosting the ritual, not I."

Again, I waved the Sovereign High Priest away and asked that he leave. Hartmut and Angelica basically forced him out of the waiting room this time.

Leonore peered down at me, worried. "Are you well, Lady Rozemyne? You seem exhausted already."

"There has been so much on my mind recently that I must be losing sleep. I am not so tired that I cannot perform the ritual, but I do not have the strength to deal with Immanuel right now." His lunatic, somewhat unfocused stare always put me on edge. Just being in his presence was gross and unsettling. It was as though simply facing him drained me of my life force.

I hadn't even spoken to my retainers about the fact that I was being adopted into the royal family. Thinking about everything I would need to do upon my return to Ehrenfest was enough to make me sigh. I would need to inform Wilfried that our engagement was being canceled, confirm what my retainers intended to do, and train Melchior to take over at the temple—and tie up the lower city's loose ends on top of that.

I also need to write Ferdinand another letter, this time using invisible

ink. There's so much he needs to know, like how I secured him a hidden room and protected not just Ehrenfest but the entire country. Oh, and our discoveries related to the dangerous silver cloth, and the weird thing Professor Hortensia said to Detlinde... Just a ton, really. I wonder if Sylvester will grant me permission...

"Lady Rozemyne, the participants have all arrived and received an explanation of today's ceremony. As the Sovereign temple is going to perform it, I shall serve as the High Priest."

I gazed up to see Immanuel; he had evidently come to fetch me while I was lost in thought. He extended a hand to me, but Hartmut swiftly smacked it away.

"It would be much too dangerous for you to act as High Priest," he said with a smile. "A blue priest who is not himself a noble could never endure so many aubs making an offering. At best, the flow would completely drain you of your mana. At worst, it would kill you. Even standing on the outskirts would put your life in danger."

Hartmut carefully wiped the part of his hand that had touched Immanuel and added in a low voice that, while he did not care what fate befell the Sovereign High Priest, he did not want anything to happen that might trouble me. Then, he offered me his hand instead. My eyes flitted between the two men before I eventually accepted it.

"Indeed, we would not want you to pass away during the ritual," I said to Immanuel, then turned my attention to my retainers. "Damuel, I would ask you to participate by the edge of the circle. Please signal us if the burden becomes too great."

"Understood."

"Everyone else, do not participate. Focus on your guard duty."

"Yes, my lady!"

So, with my retainers surrounding me, I made my way to the auditorium. Angelica was behind me, and I could sense that she was paying excruciatingly close attention to Immanuel's every move.

"The High Bishop shall now enter!" came the expected call, and a bell started to ring.

I made my appearance, and the gathered nobles all turned to look at me. They were kneeling atop a red cloth and, true to the Sovereign High Priest's complaints, positioned around chalices rather than facing the shrine.

They look a bit like a pie chart...

Every noble was wearing a cape in their duchy's color, and

their doughnut formation only made the comparison more striking. As far as the ratios went, the greater duchies had more representation, whereas the lesser duchies had... considerably less. The weaker one's mana, the closer one was to the outermost rings, so it made sense that the archducal couples were all so close to the center.

As I walked through the nobles, I heard Damuel stop Immanuel with a candid, "This is as far as you go." It was best to leave the situation to him.

I glanced over at Ehrenfest's ocher capes and spotted Sylvester kneeling at the very front. Florencia was absent rather than beside him—as expected, considering her pregnancy—but Karstedt and several others of the Knight's Order were keeping watch from outside the circle.

Oh, there are Sovereign nobles participating as well.

A group wearing black capes was in position between the reds and blues. They were scholars and attendants, I assumed. The royals weren't going to participate, so they were standing a short distance away from the red cloth and the nobles kneeling atop it.

Surrounding the royal family was the Sovereign Knight's Order, as imposing as ever. They were glaring straight at us.

I soon arrived at the center of the circle, where there were two large chalices and many smaller ones. They hadn't been particularly hard to gather, I was told; while the Sovereignty didn't have giebes, royals other than the Zent supplied mana to their villas and the surrounding land as giebes would. I checked the chalices to make sure they contained empty feystones, then nodded. They would do well enough.

"Aub Ehrenfest. Rozemyne," the Zent proclaimed. "As the representative of all those gathered here today, I thank you for agreeing to cooperate on such short notice."

I crossed my arms and knelt in response, then placed my hands on the red cloth beneath me. Hartmut got on his knees beside me, but my blue-robed guard knights remained standing.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world," I said, then waited patiently as everyone repeated after me.

"I am one who offers prayer and gratitude to the gods who have created the world."

Their voices were mismatched at the start but gradually

aligned, much like during our previous Dedication Ritual at the Royal Academy. And as per usual, waves of light began coursing down the red cloth and into the chalices.

Wait, what? Only the Royal Academy's divine instrument is shining.

My understanding had been that ceremonies performed with one's schtappe formed pillars of light, while those performed with temple instruments did not—but I was evidently mistaken. Just one of the chalices began to shine crimson, as though declaring itself the only real instrument among a group of phonies. The light shimmered as though it were a flame, then rose up into the air like sparks. It was yet another strange event, completely different from a pillar of light.

This is kind of similar to what I saw on the Night of Flutrane.

As I stared at the spectacle, mesmerized, I heard Damuel say that we had done enough. I took my hands off the floor and gracefully stood up.

“Everyone, please remove your hands from the cloth,” I said. “I expect that some of you are reaching the limits of your mana, so let us end the ceremony here.”

Damuel was a laynoble with the mana of a mednoble, but his limit was bound to be considerably lower than that of a noble equipped to attend the Archduke Conference; even a moderately effective rejuvenation potion would restore him. The aubs already had experience supplying their foundations, so they were entirely unperturbed, and while those who had never participated in a religious ceremony before seemed tired, nobody looked to be on the verge of collapsing. It was more than we could say for the previous Dedication Ritual.

Mm-hmm. At this rate, they shouldn't have any trouble doing this each year and gaining more experience with ceremonies. Nobody will give too much and shoot themselves in the foot. Isn't it perfect?

But as soon as a victorious smile graced my lips, the blue priests and shrine maidens who had apparently been participating by the edge collapsed, unconscious. I could only cover my mouth and utter an “Oops.”

I... forgot they were here. And, wait—if they do this ritual all the time, shouldn't they know their limits?!

This was a tremendous shock, but I maintained a neutral expression while looking over the nobles and directing those who needed a rejuvenation potion to drink one. The room grew noisier

as people began to replenish themselves, but I could still easily speak over them.

“In truth, this was a winter ceremony meant to fill chalices for the giebes to then use to wet the earth. If you continue to pray and offer mana in your temples, then your harvests will increase aplenty. The process will even allow you to obtain additional divine protections from the gods.”

I punctuated my last remark by noting how many divine protections Wilfried received.

After listening closely to my explanation, the Zent offered a grave nod. “Henceforth, we shall perform a Dedication Ritual each winter so that our students might gain more experience with religious ceremonies. Our children will need to pray from a younger age if they wish to obtain these critical protections. It was proposed that Klassenberg and Ehrenfest would continue to host these ceremonies to progress their joint research, and both duchies have expressed that they are willing.”

Uh, did we formally agree to that?

The matter had come up in the underground archive, but did Sylvester even know about this? Or did it count as academy business and not require his permission? In either case, now that the Zent had announced it—and to such an important crowd—it would be more or less impossible for us to back out. The nobles urged to participate in today’s ritual were just as trapped; they all glanced at their rejuvenation potion pouches with looks that seemed to say, “You intend to continue stealing our mana?” I couldn’t help but feel sorry for them.

“As the Zent has said, it is necessary to perform religious ceremonies not only to obtain divine protections but also to support Yurgenschmidt as a whole,” I pronounced. “That said, as one must inevitably follow the ritual with a rejuvenation potion, we understand the burden this will place on the students.”

Several of the nobles shot their heads up to look at me—mostly those from the losing duchies. “Will Ehrenfest distribute rejuvenation potions as it did for the previous Dedication Ritual?” one of them asked.

“I am afraid not. As I am sure you can imagine, not even a greater duchy like Klassenberg could readily make rejuvenation potions for the entire Royal Academy. Ehrenfest would stand no chance at all.” The hope quickly faded from their eyes, but I

couldn't risk putting such a heavy burden on Ehrenfest when there was a good chance that I wouldn't even be there next year.

"Instead, to make it easier for everyone to brew their own potions, I would like to teach you all a prayer that will rejuvenate your gathering spots."

"Hm? Our gathering spots...?"

The nobles looked confused, so I nodded. I would teach them the prayer and nothing more; if they wanted better ingredients, they would need to rejuvenate their gathering spots themselves. That was why we had only squeezed a conservative amount of mana from them this time.

"There are mysterious magic circles engraved in the gathering spots granted to your dormitories," I said. "If your nobles all press their hands against them and offer their mana as you have done here, then your gathering spots will be replenished with an abundance of materials. This will make it easier for you to brew rejuvenation potions, and it will serve as another ritual you can perform."

As the buzz in the room got louder, I faced the nobles and taught them the prayer to Flutrane that was used during Spring Prayer. Some struggled to hear me over the noise, so I repeated it again and again while stealthily channeling my mana into the not-entirely-filled chalices.

"Now the chalice is shining green?!" someone cried.

"Hm...? Oh, my apologies," I said. "I was repeating the prayer, so I must have accidentally begun an entirely different ceremony." I frantically removed my hands from the now full chalices and put on a smile. That had almost been a gigantic blunder, but adding that extra bit of mana had surely secured me the full year that I'd bargained for.

And so, the Archduke Conference's Dedication Ritual ended without incident.

Before we left, I asked Ehrenfest's adults to rejuvenate our gathering spot. Thanks to their large numbers, this proceeded without issue, which came as quite a relief; I was glad to know that they would manage once I was gone.

Epilogue

“Done at last.”

After the conclusion of the Archduke Conference, Hildebrand sat down to have dinner with his mother, Magdalena; he was too young to participate in the Dedication Ritual, so he wanted to know how it had gone. He had considered asking his retainers to take part and then questioning them instead, but his guards were unable to leave their charge unattended. It had also been necessary for them to stay and assist with guarding the Sovereignty while so many were absent for the ceremony.

“How was it, Mother?” the prince eagerly asked. “Did you see any pillars of light?”

Instead of merely watching the ritual as a member of the royal family, Magdalena had participated as a Sovereign noble. Hildebrand could not wait to hear about her experience; the ceremonies that Rozemyne performed as the High Bishop were always so dramatically unique.

Magdalena cut into the herb-wrapped bird on her plate, popped a morsel in her mouth, then scanned the room. The prince’s excitement must have rubbed off on his attendant and guard knights, as they were also listening with great interest.

“No, I did not even glimpse the ‘red pillar’ that the other royals said occurred during the winter.”

“Oh... Is that so...?” Hildebrand replied, crestfallen. He had assumed that strange occurrences were a given when Rozemyne performed a ceremony.

“Lady Rozemyne speculated that using one of the temple’s divine instruments rather than her schtappe might have been the reason—or the fact that we were performing a winter ceremony in the spring.”

“Were you disappointed, Mother? I know how much you wanted to see it.”

Magdalena had not been able to participate in the previous Dedication Ritual, since she had needed to stay at the palace to

complete administrative work. She had heard about it from the royals who did attend, though, and their descriptions had made her declare that she would one day see it for herself.

“That said,” Magdalena continued, her red eyes narrowing into a mischievous smile, “one of the chalices did glow the same divine red, and we witnessed the most wonderfully fantastical sight as the light shimmered up into the sky.”

“I knew it! Something *did* happen!” Hildebrand exclaimed, in high spirits once again. “Please tell me more, Mother.”

Just as Magdalena had said, the pillar of red seen during the winter Dedication Ritual had not made a second appearance—but that did not mean she had nothing to report. As the participants had gradually begun to pray in sync, they had started to feel as though they were becoming one. Entrusting themselves to the flow of mana had actually been quite comforting. Hearing the delight in his mother’s voice made Hildebrand resent the age restrictions that had kept him from attending as well.

“It was my first time performing a religious ceremony with so many in attendance,” Magdalena continued, “and I must admit, the joy it brought me was indescribable. Even the exhaustion afterward was pleasant enough.”

Several of the participants had apparently collapsed during the previous ritual, so Rozemyne had ended its spring repeat much sooner. Thanks to her consideration, none of the nobles had passed out from a lack of mana.

“That is not to say that *nobody* collapsed, though,” Magdalena noted. “The mana flowed so quickly that the Sovereign temple’s blue priests and shrine maidens were unable to stop in time. Rozemyne was very troubled, as she had already told them that they did not have enough mana to keep up.”

It was only natural that there would be a huge mana disparity between priests who had never compressed their mana before, and the aubs and retainers who supported their duchies. Even in Ehrenfest’s temple, Rozemyne was said to perform the Dedication Ritual separately from the local blue priests.

“I suppose it could not be helped, as the Sovereign temple has never before performed the Dedication Ritual with nobles,” Magdalena said with a laugh. She believed that the Sovereign temple had gotten too cocksure ever since its discovery of a means to find the next Zent. It had made demand after demand of the

royal family... but its humiliation during the ceremony had satisfied her desire for vengeance.

After dinner, the mother and son moved from the dining hall to a parlor. Arthur prepared them both tea, after which Hildebrand cleared the room; it had been such an aggressively turbulent Archduke Conference for the royal family that they had no shortage of confidential matters to discuss. Even the least serious of them required privacy and the use of sound-blocking magic tools.

Hildebrand gripped one such tool, then looked at Magdalena, who was leisurely enjoying the aroma of her tea. "Did it work?" he asked in a low voice. "Did we strengthen everyone's impression of Rozemyne as a saint, and demonstrate that she is special enough to be adopted by the king?"

"Quite. The ritual alone would have sufficed, but then she repeated a prayer that would make it easier for everyone to brew their own rejuvenation potions. The events that followed were not part of our plan, but they were exceedingly convenient; seeing the chalice shine green must have erased any lingering doubts from the minds of the nonbelievers. Everyone should now agree that Ehrenfest should not be permitted to keep her to themselves."

Rozemyne had not only reinforced the fact that her religious ceremonies produced bizarre phenomena, but also demonstrated that she knew the words to a prayer that could rejuvenate gathering spots. Then, she had caused a divine instrument to shine simply while attempting to share her knowledge. It was all more than enough to warrant her reputation as a saint used to speaking with the gods.

Magdalena continued, "Even without the Grutrissheit, she belongs in the Sovereignty. Ehrenfest will consider it a great loss, but few others will protest her adoption."

Indeed, when it came to religious ceremonies, Rozemyne had a wealth of wisdom and experience. Her mana capacity befitted a Zent, and the translated slates from the underground archive indicated that, because she had managed to enter every one of the Royal Academy's shrines, she was omni-elemental. Even if she could not become the country's next ruler, her mana would greatly benefit future generations of the royal family.

"I find it so very hard to believe that she is the same young woman who requested a book room as a prerequisite for her

marriage...” Magdalena said with a sigh, then sipped at her tea.

Hildebrand picked up his cup as well, taking care to hold it as his mother was holding hers. “Rozemyne simply does not want to marry Sigiswald,” he said, then took a sip himself.

Rozemyne had teared up and started trembling midway through her private conversation with Sigiswald in the underground archive. That she had given him such an impossible condition was proof enough that she wanted to avoid marrying him at all costs.

“We are fortunate that Aub Ehrenfest agreed to do away with that request,” Magdalena said.

“But, um... has Father really approved of this? We mean to end Rozemyne’s engagement to Wilfried, so...”

Rozemyne’s current engagement had already received the king’s support, and the king’s word was absolute. Were they really able to pair her with someone else? If so, Hildebrand wondered, would it be possible for him to cancel his own engagement? So many questions ran through his mind.

Magdalena set down her cup and gave a light shrug. “He did not object, as this new arrangement is the most peaceful way to resolve our problems. Lord Wilfried might have been able to join Lady Rozemyne in the Sovereignty as her prince consort, were Ehrenfest more powerful, but Aub Ehrenfest was clear that the role would prove too much for his son. I expect that, with his duchy’s low population, he wished not to lose any more talented nobles.”

As far as Magdalena knew, Ehrenfest’s sudden rise through the ranks was largely due to Rozemyne, and its most talented individuals were among the younger generation.

She went on, “Aub Ehrenfest displayed a willingness to swallow the demands put to him, as one would expect of a lesser duchy... but one of the young scholars with him objected, introduced his own terms, and displayed an intention to negotiate.”

After receiving so many requests from the other duchies for Rozemyne to be made the High Bishop of the Sovereign temple, Sigiswald and the Zent had made the suggestion to Ehrenfest. The aub and his retainers had said not a word in response, merely looking troubled, until one young scholar had dared to protest.

“That is out of the question,” he had said with a calm and dazzling smile. “The first Zent was a High Bishop—and, for some time, so were those who followed. Ehrenfest honors this by selecting its own High Bishops from among its archduke candidates.

Likewise, should a temple under the royal family's jurisdiction not be overseen by a member of the royal family? I would suggest Prince Hildebrand. Have him serve as High Bishop until he comes of age. If you wish to know what he will need to study in preparation, I will explain; I am already supervising the education of a future High Bishop."

The royal family had just proposed moving an Ehrenfest archduke candidate to the Sovereign temple, so they were in no position to refuse to send one of their own as well.

"So I would need to endure the temple on top of moving to Ahrensbach...?" Hildebrand asked. He was treated so poorly compared to his elder brothers, who were both getting to stay as royals. Was he really so inferior in his father's eyes?

"I would never allow that to happen," Magdalena declared, comforting her son with kind eyes. Her warmth made him feel safe, though he still spoke quietly as he said...

"Must I marry into Ahrensbach...?"

Hildebrand wanted to hear the same words of reassurance—that his mother would never let him be taken—but she gave him a dry smile. "That is a royal decree, I am afraid."

"It unnerves me to think that Detlinde is my future mother-in-law. And will I really be able to get along with an archduke candidate raised by someone like her?"

He had only briefly heard Detlinde's voice when they were in the underground archive, and most of her other remarks he had only learned about from other people, but that was still enough for him to gauge what kind of a person she was. And then there was the ordonnanz from Ahrensbach expressing her refusal to participate in the Dedication Ritual. Still, he could not openly refuse a royal decree. His mother was the only one to whom he could express his unease.

Magdalena stood up at once and gently embraced the seated prince. "Everything is going to be alright. I will eliminate Lady Detlinde before you must leave for Ahrensbach. Her fiancé, Lord Ferdinand, would normally be expected to keep a close eye on her and prevent her from committing such malicious acts, but I see no reason to count on him for that." Her tone became more forceful as she continued, "He must know better than anyone that her misdeeds will affect him as well once they are married, and that he was expected to train her before he was locked into such a

miserable fate—but an entire half year has passed, and she remains so unruly.”

Magdalena went on to list Detlinde’s many misdoings, chastising Ferdinand all the while for having allowed them to happen. In her words, he did not understand the hearts of women and was much too careless when it came to taking care of others. His shortcomings were not just with the opposite sex, though—he was the kind of person who would refuse to interact with most people in general.

“Let me be clear,” she said, “Lord Ferdinand is an attractive man, he obtained prodigious grades, and his strength as a knight is undeniable. From afar, he would appear to be the perfect man. He can negotiate, manipulate factions, and devise plots so malicious that nobody would wonder why he is called the Lord of Evil... but that is all. He is an emotionless husk of a man, incapable of engaging with others on a personal level.”

Hildebrand met his mother’s vicious character analysis with wide eyes. Her description of Ferdinand was so far removed from all the positive things that Rozemyne had said about him during tea parties and over lunch.

“Um, Mother... Could you be mistaking him for someone else? He was Rozemyne’s mentor, was he not?”

“He was, but I am not mistaken. Lord Ferdinand must have made his retainers look after Lady Rozemyne on his behalf.” She paused, then sincerely announced, “That man could never raise a young child. Never.” He was apparently so strict and unforgiving that any child in his care would wither before they ever had a chance to grow.

“Still, Rozemyne made his safety one of the conditions for her adoption, did she not? Does she not hold him close to her heart, then?” She would need to have strong feelings for him to have made such a demand during negotiations with the royal family.

Magdalena nodded, looking unsatisfied. “Indeed, that appears to be the case. To be honest, when Prince Sigiswald told me, I could not contain my shock; I never thought that anyone but Aub Ehrenfest would care for Lord Ferdinand as family.”

Ferdinand must have been receiving the most unfortunate treatment in Ahrensbach; why else would Rozemyne have found it necessary to petition the royal family, beseeching them to improve his living conditions and spare him from punishment by

association?

“Mother, I want to be the next Zent. Then I won’t have to go to Ahrensbach, correct? It must be a terrible place if Rozemyne had to resort to such means.”

“I will stop at nothing to correct Ahrensbach before your move there, all so that you can live without fear,” Magdalena said, still embracing him tenderly. “However, you cannot become the Zent.”

“Why not?”

“Even if you started now, there would not be enough time to prepare you. We are already in such dire straits that we can barely wait a year for Rozemyne’s adoption. Meanwhile, you do not have enough elements, nor have you even enrolled at the Royal Academy. How long do you believe it would take you to obtain the necessary qualifications? Yurgenschmidt’s collapse will not wait for you to grow up. But even those reasons are only secondary. Most important of all, if we do adopt Rozemyne next year, and she successfully obtains the Grutrisheit... *she* will become the next Zent.”

There could not be two Zents at once—and if the young Prince Hildebrand, son of King Trauerqual, came to be recognized as a Zent candidate, the subsequent contest for the throne would divide the country.

“Neither the current Zent nor I will allow the royal family to be disturbed during the reign of a new queen, especially one whose engagement we canceled and whom we forced into power for our own reasons. As a royal yourself, you must not introduce such instability.”

The prince hung his head at his mother’s harsh words. Though he knew that she spoke true, he did not want to believe her.

“Mother, Rozemyne is sickly—she couldn’t endure the harsh duties of a Zent. She needs someone to support her. I just want to help.”

Hildebrand already knew from seeing his father’s exhaustion that the obligations of the throne would prove too much for Rozemyne. A girl who was sickly enough to collapse at tea parties could never be expected to rule. Just as the law required archduchesses to take husbands from among the country’s archducal families for support, he believed that a queen would need to marry someone qualified to be a Zent.

“You are right to be concerned, Hildebrand, but Prince

Sigiswald is best suited to support her—as both a fiancé and a husband. It is not your place to intervene.”

“I am sure that Sigiswald made Rozemyne hate him...”

Hildebrand grumbled, his lips pursed in dissatisfaction. “I would show her so much more kindness.”

Magdalena gave her son a scrutinizing look. “I realize that your time with Lady Rozemyne has made you rather fond of her, but you must not think above your station. You are engaged to Lady Letizia and must learn to cope with your emotions better.”

No matter the extent of the prince’s displeasure, royal decrees were set in stone. The only person who could overturn his and Rozemyne’s engagements was the Zent.

By becoming the Zent, Hildebrand thought, I could save Rozemyne from being forced into a marriage she doesn’t want and from having to take the throne. I also wouldn’t need to move to Ahrensbach.

The prince wriggled out of his mother’s embrace. “If this really is so urgent, then shouldn’t the entire royal family be working toward it?”

“We were able to gather mana during the recent Dedication Ritual, but our duties do not end there. Even now, we are unlikely to have enough leeway for us all to devote ourselves. And even if we did... you will not obtain your schtappe until your third year at the Royal Academy.”

“My... third year?”

“There has been a change to the Royal Academy’s curriculum. You will only be able to obtain the schtappe you will need to enter the shrines after Lady Rozemyne has already come of age.”

But that means I would never make it in time. Why is Father not even giving me a chance?!

Hildebrand swallowed down his dissatisfaction with another gulp of tea; he knew that no matter what he said, the others in his family wouldn’t listen. His feelings did not fade, however; instead, they sat festering in the pit of his stomach.

And with that, their mother-son dinner came to an end.

After the Archduke Conference—which had proven to be especially tumultuous for both the royal family and the third prince personally—Hildebrand returned to his usual routine. He was going to be training with Raublut, the Sovereign knight commander, for the first time in quite a while. The Knight’s Order had been busy

with guard duty throughout the duration of the conference, so the prince had merely been training with his guard knights between breakfast and going to the underground archive.

Hildebrand and Raublut started with a practical review of the fundamentals before finally crossing blades. Their exchange was only brief, though; Raublut soon grimaced and demanded that they stop.

“Your bladework is off,” he said. “What in the world happened? No amount of training will stick with you today.”

Hildebrand went with Raublut to the resting area, still carrying his heavy sword. He had thought that he was successfully hiding his emotions, so he was frustrated to have been found out so easily.

The prince’s head attendant, Arthur, was surprised to see his charge return so early. Still, he served the pair some tea.

Raublut drank from his cup. “So, what has you looking so down?”

“I... cannot say.”

Hildebrand was unable to admit his reluctance to marry into Ahrensbach. The thought of Detlinde being his mother-in-law was depressing beyond compare, but he could not reveal that he was searching for a way to escape his current engagement. To do that would be to oppose a royal decree.

He also couldn’t say that Rozemyne was closest to becoming the next Zent; the royal family was keeping such information from their own retainers, so discussing it openly was unthinkable. His beliefs that Sigiswald was a poor match for Rozemyne and that he himself would do much better as her husband were also out of the question.

The third prince wanted nothing more than to speed up his mana compression, circle the Royal Academy’s shrines with his father and Sigiswald, and meet the requirements for him to become the next Zent with Rozemyne by his side. He would need to manage it before his coming of age, but it would secure him the power to cancel his own engagement and free Rozemyne from hers.

But there was a problem—because of the recent change to the Royal Academy’s curriculum, he would now obtain his schtappe in his third year rather than his first, by which point Rozemyne would already be of age, and trying to become the Zent would be pointless.

Unable to voice his true opinions, Hildebrand puffed out his cheeks and changed the subject. He was already frustrated that

everyone kept asking him questions about such sensitive subjects.

"I was just wondering what Schlaftraum's flowers are," he said.

Raublut shot his head up to look at the prince. "Excuse me?" He seemed unable to keep up with the sudden turn in their conversation, and seeing the shock on his face made Hildebrand smile.

"Hortensia asked Detlinde about them at the Royal Academy, in the library's archive. Do you like them, Raublut? It seems they can only be found in Ahrensbach. What are they like?" Hildebrand remembered how surprised he had been to learn that the brawny knight commander had a soft spot for flowers—and that he liked ones from Ahrensbach, of all places.

"Oh. She did, did she?" Raublut paused, then adopted the smile that nobles often wore to hide their unrest. His eyes wandered the room; then, after searching for his next words, he said, "Schlaftraum's flowers are... white. And sweet-scented. I do like them, yes, but they are hard to find. She must have wanted to know whether they were blooming this year."

Was it rare for them to bloom? Hildebrand cocked his head at the Sovereign knight commander. "Were you not from Gilessenmeyer? How do you know about a flower that blooms only in Ahrensbach?"

A distant look in his eyes, Raublut reached up to touch the faded scar above his cheek. Hildebrand got the impression that it had something to do with his response; the knight commander's expression was one of a man still mourning a loss.

"Remembering something?" Hildebrand prompted.

"They were a favorite of the lady of a villa to which I was assigned directly after coming of age. It had a greenhouse in one corner, in which the flowers bloomed. Not even the lady herself could say when they first appeared, but generations had treasured them. However... I was reassigned not even five years later. The villa has now been closed, and it no longer has a lady."

Perhaps the flowers had come from an Ahrensbach archduke candidate who married into the royal family, Hildebrand thought. The civil war had taken place before he was born, but he had heard about villas needing to be closed down after many of the royals were purged. Raublut was surely referring to one of those.

"Now, my old memories aside..." Raublut said, "I would hear your troubles, Prince Hildebrand. If you remain as you are, then

your studies will suffer as well as your bladework.” He glanced toward Arthur. “I am not the only one who is worried about you.”

Indeed, Arthur looked concerned as well. Despite the prince’s best efforts to change the subject, they were now back where they had started. Raublut was even jokingly acting offended that Hildebrand would ask questions while refusing to answer any himself.

The young man felt compelled to oblige them... but how? He couldn’t say that he didn’t want to marry into Ahrensbach, nor was he at liberty to say that Rozemyne was closest to becoming the next Zent, or that the king was going to adopt her. And, for obvious reasons, he couldn’t declare that he thought he would make a better husband for Rozemyne than anyone else. At most, he could complain about the change to the Royal Academy’s curriculum.

“I was hoping to obtain my schtappe as soon as possible, but Father has changed the Royal Academy’s lesson plan. That has soured my mood a little.”

“As soon as possible, hm...?” Raublut repeated, his eyes wide. He then squinted at Hildebrand and scoffed. “You are a prince. You can open the door to the Farthest Hall whenever you please.”

“Truly?!” Hildebrand exclaimed—just as Arthur barked out a protest.

“Are you not the Sovereign knight commander?! How could you say such a thing?!”

Raublut raised a hand to silence the head attendant. “*However*, the Zent must have changed the curriculum for your sake, Prince Hildebrand. You would do well to recognize your father’s act of compassion.”

“What...?” Hildebrand asked. How had it been anything of the sort? He wanted to become a Zent candidate before Rozemyne came of age; then he would put a stop to both of their engagements. To those ends, he needed to get his schtappe right away. How was the change of curriculum anything but an obstruction?

Raublut carefully explained, “We have learned that it is best to compress one’s mana to the fullest extent before obtaining a schtappe. One should also pray to the gods to gain their divine protections and more elements. That is why the curriculum was changed, and it must have happened so suddenly because the Zent wishes for you to obtain the best schtappe that you can.”

Arthur nodded, relieved. “Prince Hildebrand, the knight

commander speaks the truth. Please understand that King Trauerqual has done this for you.”

Hearing “the best schtappe” gave Hildebrand pause. His mother had said during a conversation between royals that visiting the Royal Academy’s small shrines and obtaining the divine protections of all the subordinate gods would grant one the protections of the primary gods as well. He wasn’t very skilled when it came to transcribing texts, so he had mostly spent his time in the archive replicating maps.

Will visiting the shrines give me more elements? the prince wondered. Maybe he would be able to become the next Zent after all.

“Does this mean that, assuming I obtained every element through prayer and mana compression, Father would not stop me from getting my schtappe?”

Raublut nodded. “You certainly would do well to compress your mana and obtain new elements alongside the Zent. I will speak to him when the time is right.”



Hildebrand grinned from ear to ear; he knew from his long-term relationship with Raublut that the knight commander was being sincere. Arthur likewise smiled and thanked the man for his consideration.

“It was nothing special,” Raublut said, shaking his head and returning the smile. He then gestured to a nearby knight, who came forward and presented Arthur with a box. “Inside are new learning materials offered to us by Ehrenfest, namely books and toys designed to help with memorizing the names of the gods. They are apparently one of the secret reasons why the duchy’s grades rose so abruptly.”

Ehrenfest would now be selling the resources to other duchies, so copies had been offered to the royal family. The king had ordered that they be given to Hildebrand to help him with his studies, and the inspection of them had just recently concluded.

“Lady Magdalena said that we should wait until you enter the Royal Academy before giving them to you,” Arthur explained, “but there is no harm in getting a head start with one’s studies. Use these materials well; knowing the names of the gods is essential to the prayers you will need.”

Arthur then handed the prince an Ehrenfest book. Hildebrand was used to them by now. He thumbed through it and saw the most splendid illustrations alongside easy-to-understand explanations. Perhaps these resources would help him get closer to Rozemyne.

I’m going to learn the names of the gods, pray to them, obtain new elements, and ask Father for my schtappe.

Hildebrand was glad; at last, he had a path to follow. After wandering aimlessly through the darkness, someone had given him a light.

Raublut grinned and rose to his feet, sword in hand. “Now, Prince Hildebrand—let us resume our training and see if your blade is as straight as your gaze.”

“Right!”

After returning the book to Arthur, Hildebrand took up his own sword and chased after the knight commander.

An Unwanted Marriage

It happened at the end of winter, a few days after the Royal Academy's graduation ceremony. I was still in complete disbelief when my retainer came to fetch me from the Drewanchel Dormitory.

"Lady Adolphine, Lord Ortwin is requesting a discussion. The archducal couple will also be present."

After attending the Interduchy Tournament and the subsequent graduation ceremony as Prince Sigiswald's fiancée, I wanted to know more about the magic circle that had momentarily appeared during Lady Detlinde's dedication whirl, as well as the reason why the Sovereign temple's High Bishop was proclaiming her to be a Zent candidate. There were two obvious sources for the information I sought—the royal family and the Sovereign temple—but then there was Ehrenfest as well; Lady Eglantine had apparently summoned Lady Rozemyne when gathering her own intelligence.

The matter was sensitive enough that the royal family had decided not to keep me informed, and that was how I expected things to stay. That was why I had asked Ortwin to contact Ehrenfest, on the off chance that he might make a discovery of some kind.

"He actually learned something from Lord Wilfried...?" I asked, stunned.

It was late enough that the graduation ceremony had concluded, and everyone was preparing to return to their home duchies. I had not thought that Ehrenfest would respond to my brother's investigation, let alone that they would tell us anything. Had it been another duchy inviting someone from Drewanchel, we would have refused without fail. It seemed that Ortwin had established a much closer bond with Ehrenfest than I realized.

"I shall head to the meeting room at once," I said.

If the Sovereign High Bishop was correct, and Lady Detlinde went on to become the next Zent, then the current royal family would inevitably be eliminated. That, in turn, would violate the

terms of the engagement contract between the king and Drewanchel, rendering it null and void.

My wish might be granted after all!

I had spent years working tirelessly to become the next Aub Drewanchel, only for the Zent to swoop in and crush my dreams. After the civil war, he had sought to strengthen his support base through a marriage with the greater duchy Drewanchel, so I was now having to marry one of the princes instead.

Oh, how many times have I wished that I were not born the daughter of a first wife?

The archduke had decided that the engagement would benefit Drewanchel, and it was my duty as a member of the archducal family to obey. Everything was already set in stone, even if one of my suitors had wanted Lady Eglantine's hand in marriage purely so that he could obtain the throne and the other thought nothing of me at all.

To be frank, I loathed my engagement so terribly that I would do anything to escape it—even support Lady Detlinde, of all people, becoming the next Zent.

“Ortwin, what did Ehrenfest say?” I asked upon my arrival in the meeting room. My younger brother was already seated with our parents.

“Sister, if you would,” he replied, then held out a sound-blocker.

I accepted the magic tool and squeezed it; this was a discussion that could change the very course of my life. Hopeful, I gazed straight into Ortwin's light-brown eyes.

“Wilfried was sworn to silence, as expected,” he said. “He did not provide any details, but it would seem that simply causing that magic circle to appear does not make Lady Detlinde the next Zent. It will not affect your marriage to the prince.”

“I see,” Father said. “Well done, Ortwin.”

My parents were both relieved, but I was immensely disappointed. That I had dared to hope in the first place made the pain all the greater.

“How unfortunate...” I muttered. “If she had taken the throne, it would have been the perfect opportunity to nullify my engagement.”

“Adolphine, are you still going on about that? Your engagement has already been formally arranged.”

“Oh my. Were you not the one who described it as a contract between Drewanchel and the Zent? It seems only natural that someone else taking the throne should require us to rework or even cancel it.”

Mine was the perfect political marriage: Drewanchel would support the next Zent, who would be more accommodating to our duchy in return. But if something happened to stop Prince Sigiswald from taking the throne, then our union would serve no purpose at all. Our priority would instead be to forge a relationship with the new ruler.

“You are marrying a royal prince and the heir apparent—what more could you ask for?” my father said. “I cannot even begin to fathom the reason for your displeasure.”

“Then let me be clear: I am marrying Prince Sigiswald, a man whose spoiled upbringing has made him repulsively arrogant and who looks down on others without even realizing it. Worse still, nobody can even mention these glaring faults to him. His standing makes it too much of a risk.”

“Sister!”

“Adolphine, you...”

I had merely told the truth, but Ortwin was thunderstruck, Father was speechless, and Mother was furrowing her brow.

“My treatment as his fiancée has been far from ideal,” I said. “I doubt that will change when I become his wife. Do you really expect me to squeal with joy simply because I am marrying a prince? Just how witless do you think I am? From the bottom of my heart, I would welcome anyone to take my place.”

For as long as Lady Eglantine had yet to choose a partner, my now husband-to-be had completely ignored me, despite my being a candidate for the engagement. That had scarcely changed even now that I was formally his fiancée. Prince Sigiswald did only the bare minimum expected of him; I would receive much better treatment engaged to an archduke candidate from another duchy.

“Fear not, though,” I continued. “I understand my position and do not intend to flee from this engagement. My feelings about the matter have no relevance, as you know all too well, so I will carry out my duties as an archducal family member. If the terms of our contract were violated, I would do my utmost to have it nullified, but as it stands, I am beaten down once again.”

On that note, I stood up and briskly left the meeting room. I

knew that I had disrespected the royal family, but I was in no mood to hear anyone's complaints about it.

Winter had passed, and spring was soon to follow. There were but a few more days before the Archduke Conference, so I was moving the last of my belongings to Prince Sigiswald's villa and managing the preparation of the room I would move into after our wedding. Seeing my new home slowly come together filled me with neither giddiness nor anticipation for my future.

"Your disinterest is showing clearly on your face, Lady Adolphine."

"You must be mistaken, Oderkunst. For security reasons, only a limited number of people can enter this villa, and only for a limited amount of time. I will not be able to rely on Drewanchel personnel after my wedding, and there is not much time before the Starbind Ceremony. I am simply worried about whether everything will go as planned."

Oderkunst was a Sovereign scholar from Drewanchel, due to become my retainer after the Starbinding. His little sister Lisbeth served as my attendant, so I felt more at ease with him than I did with other Sovereign nobles.

"I have heard no shortage of complaints from Lisbeth, but if you insist," Oderkunst replied, teasingly raising an eyebrow at me. I would need to scold the girl for leaking sensitive information, but it was heartening to know that at least one of my Sovereign retainers knew how I truly felt.

"More importantly..." I said, "what business do you have here? I was told that I would not be introduced to my Sovereign retainers until after the ceremony. You are not serving me yet, are you? Is it okay for you to be in my room like this?"

"I am but a messenger," he replied. "Prince Sigiswald wishes to see you. He said that I was a fine choice for the task, since I am to become your retainer in 'some few days.'"

The fact that Oderkunst and my other future retainers were going to enter my service after the Starbind Ceremony meant that they were having to get ready to move their living quarters on top of their usual preparations for the Archduke Conference. They had no free time to speak of, and it would normally be unthinkable to treat those who had not yet been formally assigned to me as though they were already my retainers.

It repulses me that Prince Sigiswald assumes he is busier than everyone else, and that he would casually make demands of someone who has not yet begun to serve me.

“I wonder what news could inspire him to summon his busy bride-to-be so soon before our Starbinding...” I mused aloud. “I can only hope he has wonderful news—perhaps that the ceremony is being canceled, or at the very least delayed.”

“Lady Adolphine!” Lisbeth cried, her lips pursed.

I sighed and waved away her protest. “Everyone here is from Drewanchel. Allow me this brief opportunity to vent before the wedding.”

After selecting several of my already busy retainers to accompany me, I went to answer the first prince’s summons. This little inconvenience would only delay our work. It was just like him not to give any advance notice or show us even the slightest concern.

Whatever shall I do if this is about something trifling?

I pondered that question as I went to the parlor where Prince Sigiswald awaited me, but my fear was soon put to rest. His dark-green eyes softened into a smile as he delivered some news of critical importance.

“Nahelache has given birth, and we do not want my mana to change while the baby is so young. Thus, our intimacy must be delayed for some time.”

It was unbelievable. I was at a complete loss for words. The shock was so great that my mind went blank.

What in the world does this prince think he’s saying?

There was nothing strange about Lady Nahelache giving birth before my wedding. It also made perfect sense that the news was being kept private, as children were generally not made public until after they were baptized. She had displayed none of the telltale signs of pregnancy during the graduation ceremony, from which I could infer that at least a season had passed since she gave birth. The prince had not said exactly how long our “intimacy” would need to be postponed, but he surely intended to wait until his mana no longer influenced the child.

It still made no sense, though. One would not normally impregnate another wife so soon after becoming engaged to another, and a man who did not want his fiancée to influence his mana would delay the entire marriage. After all, it would make no

sense to perform the Starbind Ceremony.

Was that what he meant to say? That our wedding is being delayed, not just our intimacy? Yes, that must be it. A prince would never do something so incomprehensible.

“My apologies,” I said. “You meant to say that our wedding is going to be delayed, but I misunderstood you. Fear not—Drewanchel shan’t utter a word in complaint.”

This new development would require us to significantly change our plans, so it was unfortunate that we had not been informed after Lady Nahelache’s pregnancy was confirmed. Had we been told sooner, I would have done everything in my power to accommodate the delay.

“I must inform my father of this urgent news...” I said.

“But you are mistaken, Adolphine. You would do well to pay closer attention when others are speaking to you. We are not delaying our Starbind Ceremony, only the beginning of our life together.”

To think I went out of my way to let him pass this off as a misunderstanding. Must I truly marry this man?

Had this foolishness come from my little brother, Ortwin, rather than the first prince and future Zent, I would not have hesitated to give him a thorough tongue-lashing. The entire situation was insulting and absurd, but I still managed to stave off a frown and adopt a polite smile.

“Pray tell,” I said, “why would you not abide by tradition and postpone our Starbind Ceremony?”

It is outrageous that he would order me to become his wife when he has no intention of treating me like one. There had better be a truly compelling reason for this madness.

I was already being shown only the bare minimum of courtesy, but now my husband-to-be was saying that he would not treat me as a wife even after our Starbind Ceremony. How could anyone belittle me so viciously?

Even now, Prince Sigiswald was oblivious to my anger and humiliation; he looked at me as though I were a naive child and gave a troubled smile. “I suppose you do not know, Adolphine. Ever since the civil war, the royal family has been suffering from a mana shortage. We need as many royals as we can get.”

“How does that explain your decision to cast aside noble traditions and marry me by force? You understand that taking a

new wife while one's mana cannot be changed is anything but proper, do you not?" It concerned me so deeply that I was having to endure this farce in the first place.

The prince looked even more troubled, as though he had not expected my response. "Of course I understand. I am humbly asking you to assist us nonetheless."

I sincerely doubt that, and your "request" has been anything but humble.

It was clear as day that Prince Sigiswald expected me to obey his every command, and that he never considered anyone else's feelings, desires, or objections. He exuded arrogance born from a privileged upbringing and would go the rest of his life without even realizing it.

"If your circumstances really are so dire that our marriage cannot be delayed a year, then show me some reasoning," I demanded. The mana shortage had apparently been an issue since the civil war, but Ladies Nahelache and Eglantine had since joined the royal family. Even if one of them was now tending to her newborn, they must have had more leeway than before.

Sigiswald made no effort to disguise his sorrow. "They are dire indeed. An ancient magic tool we had decided not to supply until we had more mana to spare has collapsed."

"It collapsed...?" I repeated. "Never before have I heard about a magic tool collapsing simply because it was not supplied with mana. It must have been close to a foundational..."

A shiver ran down my spine. A magic tool that had been guarded by the royal family and stored in the royal palace since ancient times had to have been a crucial pillar of support for the country.

"Indeed," the prince said. "We must now investigate every magic tool we stopped supplying and refill any on the verge of collapse. That is why we require as many royals as we can secure—and the hole left by Nahelache must be filled."

In other words, now that his wife is unable to carry out her duties as a royal, he wants me to pick up her slack.

My heart iced over. Even in the context of a political marriage, there were more delicate ways to phrase the situation. Who would agree to an already insulting engagement after being told that they were needed as little more than a mana slave?

"Furthermore," Prince Sigiswald continued, "Rozemyne is going

to bless our Starbind Ceremony as High Bishop. We have cooperated with Ehrenfest and the Sovereign temple to make this happen; we cannot afford to postpone it.”

“Lady Rozemyne, serving as the High Bishop? This is news to me...”

Changing the active High Bishop was a very big deal; why had Drewanchel not been informed? I asked what had inspired the switch, which prompted the prince to give a breezy response.

“Do you recall the blessing that rained down upon Eglantine and Anastasius during their graduation? We have since learned that it came from Rozemyne.”

That blessing had sparked rumors that Prince Anastasius was better suited to become the next king than Prince Sigiswald. I knew that well, as I had been there to witness it. The royal family had evidently asked Lady Rozemyne to serve as High Bishop to wash away any and all doubts that the first prince was the best candidate to rule.

What childish idiocy.

Prince Sigiswald did not need to prove himself; the king had already made him the heir to the throne, and the mere chattering of outsiders would not change that. If nobles could so easily overturn the decisions of royalty, then I would have escaped my engagement by now.

“You would summon a student from another duchy to serve as High Bishop for the Starbind Ceremony...?” I asked, astounded. “I am opposed to this. I cannot imagine that Lady Rozemyne wants to be involved, and it should go without saying that the Sovereign High Bishop will not appreciate having his role taken from him. How do you intend to respond when this worsens our already delicate relationship with the Sovereign temple?”

“Who knows? Anastasius proposed the idea, so he is taking responsibility for it. I am unaware of the details.”

How irresponsible. It is your duty as his elder brother to chastise him and declare that you need no such blessing!

Prince Sigiswald was always desperate to push down his younger brother and elevate himself. Prince Anastasius may have proposed the idea, but it was highly likely that he had only done so because of the indirect pressure put on him by the first prince.

“In any case, that is the current state of affairs,” Prince Sigiswald said. “The Starbind Ceremony will continue as planned,

but our life as a married couple will not begin for another year.” Having said his piece, he then stood up with the smarmiest of grins. That was his way of telling me to leave already.

I could never come to like such an arrogant man.

“Prince Sigiswald, I cannot approve of our Starbind Ceremony being held this year when you have no intention of treating me as your wife. Let us marry during the next Archduke Conference instead. I will consult my father and send you a more formal response later. In the meantime, please inform Lady Rozemyne that we are delaying the ceremony.”

The moment he heard my objection, Prince Sigiswald turned to look at me, causing his soft blond hair to sway ever so slightly. His dark-green eyes were wide with shock as he said, “Adolphine, did you not hear me?”

He sat back down, no doubt intending to repeat himself, so I rose to my feet and went to leave. There was no longer any value in continuing this exchange; my father, Aub Drewanchel, would take care of the rest. It did not matter whether my engagement was delayed—he would use the opportunity to the benefit of our duchy.

“Oh, I heard every word,” I retorted as I made for the door. “Your intentions to ignore noble customs, prioritize your own convenience over everything else, and deprive me of the respect I deserve have been conveyed in full.”

“That is just... I did not say that I would *never* treat you as my wife. That time will come. We simply need to postpone, um... matters of the bedroom. I should not need to tell you that you will one day be respected as my first wife.”

Had I not protested, Prince Sigiswald would have concluded that the matter was officially settled and pressured others into complying with it by saying that he had already obtained my agreement. Perhaps such tricks would work on a woman raised to obey her husband, but I had trained to become an archduchess and clash with the archdukes of other duchies. His assumption that I would simply roll over for him would only complicate our life together.

“I will not be looked down upon as a woman cast aside by her husband,” I said. “At the very least, you will *personally* explain the circumstances to my parents and retainers. If you make it clear that the delay of our marital duties is your fault, not mine, then I will not be entirely unwilling to provide my support.”

Prince Sigiswald was staring at me, wide-eyed, unable to form his next words. I might have been too intense, considering that he was so used to everybody obeying him, but my entire life was on the line; I would not bend.

How you set the stage is what matters most, as they say.

So came the day of my Starbind Ceremony. Father had grimaced when Prince Sigiswald explained the situation to him, displeased with the break from tradition; but he had determined it best to respect the royal family's circumstances despite the extremely offensive nature of their request. As I understood it, he had squeezed more than enough out of the first prince as compensation for the inconvenience.

I expected nothing less from my father. He is as reliable as ever.

Incidentally, he had also said that he now understood why I could never love Prince Sigiswald. He remained of the opinion that I needed to accept the union for its political advantages, but he had muttered that I was "free to have my preferences."

"There," one of my attendants said. "All ready. How beautiful you look, Lady Adolphine."

"Adolphine, do away with that frown at once," my mother added. "You must not let your true feelings be known. Smile so brightly that anyone would think you are the happiest bride in the world."

"Yes, Mother."

I stepped out of my room with Mother and my attendants, who had prepared me for the ceremony. Father was waiting in the entrance hall; he looked me over, then sighed.

"You are intelligent and a hard worker. I expect you to remain tenacious even after joining the royal family. Feign obedience when you must, and exploit Prince Sigiswald as much as you can for the benefit of our duchy."

"I shall do my best."

"Then let us go."

Our nobles showered me with congratulations and words of encouragement as we left the Drewanchel Dormitory. Father escorted me to the royal family's waiting room, while our retainers surrounded us. One of them was carrying an empty wooden box.

"Prince Sigiswald, we have arrived," I announced. He and his retainers were present, but the other members of the royal family

were nowhere to be seen. They were likely either waiting elsewhere or already heading to the auditorium.

“First, the exchange of capes,” the first prince replied.

My attendant undid my brooch, removed my Drewanchel cape, then put both into the wooden box. I would no longer be able to enter our dormitory freely.

Next, one of the prince’s attendants approached us with another box, from which a separate cape was taken. This one was black on both sides, identifying the wearer as royalty. Sovereign nobles not of the royal family wore capes that were only black on the outside; the inside would display the color of their home duchy.

My attendant draped the garment around my shoulders, then fastened it with a brooch. The emerald green I was so used to was replaced with the same inky black as the royal cape.

The sorrow of parting with Drewanchel and the anxieties of entering a hopeless marriage seized my heart, but I swallowed them down and put on the elegant smile of a greater duchy archduke candidate proud to be engaged to a member of the royal family.

“Now then, let us head to the auditorium.”

Father took a step back, then knelt before me. Part of me wanted to ask him, “What are you doing?” but then I realized—now that I was wearing my black cape, I was formally the first wife of the future king. It was only natural that an aub would show such reverence, but the sight of my own father kneeling to me was thoroughly discomforting.

“Lady Adolphine, I pray for your happiness,” he said.

“That gladdens me, Aub Drewanchel.”

After saying my farewells to Father and many of my retainers, I participated in the Starbind Ceremony and received a blessing from Lady Rozemyne. The blessing was fantastical, like nothing I had ever seen before, and made me feel optimistic enough that I resolved to support Yurgenschmidt as Prince Sigiswald’s first wife and a member of the royal family.

As for putting that resolve into practice, however...

The start of the Archduke Conference had seen me thrust into an extraordinarily awkward position. Despite my marriage, I was unable to socialize as a royal, for I had not attended any of the royal family’s preparatory meetings. Nor was I allowed to participate in Drewanchel meetings anymore.

Under normal circumstances, I would use this time to rest and recuperate as my body became accustomed to the intimacy inherent to marriage—but because those activities were being delayed, no such break was necessary for me. I had simply been told not to leave the villa and was placed under watch.

“They certainly are desperate to maintain appearances...” I said.

“And who can blame them? Appearances are important to nobles and royals alike,” Lisbeth replied while cleaning up after breakfast. “How will you be spending today? You are a newlywed, after all. Perhaps you could do some embroidery for your husband.”

“I shall consider such marital duties when I am actually being treated as his wife. He married me for my mana, so perhaps I should make him some rejuvenation potions or something of the like. It seems best to brew them now, while I still have enough leeway.”

So, I summoned my new scholar Oderkunst and informed him of my intentions. “That is not very wifely at all...” he said in response.

“Ah, how alike siblings tend to be.”

Oderkunst exchanged a glance with Lisbeth, who was standing behind me, and raised an eyebrow. Their exasperated looks forced me to propose a compromise:

“Very well, then. I shall brew not just rejuvenation potions, but also charms for my husband. I assume that is ‘wifely’ enough for you. It is my understanding that royals are allowed to repeat the ritual for obtaining divine protections, meaning there is much to be gained from praying as often as possible. Charms engraved with the sigils of the gods should be of some use, no?”

“An excellent idea.”

Having obtained their approval, I changed into my brewing attire and moved to the villa’s brewing room. My scholars brought the relevant materials and recipes.

“I do not recognize this recipe from the Royal Academy’s curriculum,” Oderkunst said.

“This potion primarily replenishes one’s mana,” I explained. “Back when Lady Rozemyne performed her Dedication Ritual at the Royal Academy, I was permitted to join as a royal fiancée. The rejuvenation potion I received then was truly wonderful. I have been working to recreate it ever since, and I believe that I am rather close.”

“May I take a closer look? Um, unless you intend to keep it private, that is.”

Some recipes were unleashed unto the world, while others were kept secret. I intended to keep this one between myself and my retainers, much like Lady Rozemyne was doing with hers.

“You will need to keep it to yourself,” I said, “but I plan to have you all use this recipe anyway. May we work together to improve it even further.”

I showed Oderkunst and my other scholars the recipe, then how to prepare the ingredients and wash the tools.

“Lady Adolphine, are you going to do your own brewing?!” exclaimed the scholars of other duchies, but those from Drewanchel answered swiftly on my behalf.

“But of course. Drewanchel is known for its research; there, it is not at all unusual for archducal family members to brew.”

“Lady Adolphine conducts her own research. We scholars are here to prepare the rejuvenation potions she consumes on a daily basis and other such details. It is essential that we understand her findings on top of the ingredients and recipes she uses.”

The exchange reminded me that the archducal families of other duchies seldom brewed.

I see... It certainly is true that experienced retainers from one's own duchy are important in the Sovereignty. If not for the sage advice of my retainers learned in the ways of both Drewanchel and the Sovereignty, it would have taken ages for the two groups to come to understand one another.

“This is going to be your first time making this particular potion, so I shall provide a demonstration,” I said. “Henceforth, I will expect all rejuvenation potions to be made according to this recipe.”

“Incidentally, her demonstrating means she will permit no mistakes.”

“Oderkunst, I am not my father. Such strictness does not suit me. I will permit *three* mistakes before I lose patience.”

At once, the scholars all got serious. They intently observed my hands and the recipe while I worked; then, after I was done, one of them tested the potion I had produced.

“My mana is recovering at such tremendous speed,” the scholar said, head cocked. “What about this recipe dissatisfies you, Lady Adolphine?”

“It cannot yet compete with the potions that Lady Rozemyne distributed. You may be impressed, but her recovery speed was far superior. I wonder what ingredients she used...”

Oderkunst looked contemplative for a moment. “Although any improvement would obviously be welcome, the speed of the rejuvenation is not particularly important. One can drink a potion before bed and then wake up fully replenished, so these would suffice on a day-to-day basis.” It seemed to me that he was trying to say, “Please give it no more thought.”

“That certainly is true,” I replied with a nod. “Everyone, continue brewing until you have the recipe memorized. I will make charms to gift to Prince Sigiswald. Oderkunst, do provide your assistance.”

After giving instructions to my scholars, I started working on the charms. I gave Oderkunst a sound-blocker, then started drawing magic circles while keeping half an eye on the others.

“I am told that the royal family is experiencing a severe mana crisis,” I said. “Why would you resist further improvements to the potions?”

“The faster your mana replenishes, the harder they will work you. You are better off using standard rejuvenation potions and securing some time to rest.”

With our marital duties on hold, all that Prince Sigiswald expected me to do was offer my mana to the royal family and perform the administrative tasks that had once been entrusted to Lady Nahelache. Oderkunst was clearly worried about me, and I concluded that it would be best to heed his warning.

“Things are worse than I ever imagined,” I muttered. “I will improve the rejuvenation potion in secret. Putting that aside, Oderkunst—what news do you have of the Archduke Conference?”

“None at all. As your retainers, we are confined to this villa with you. Something must be occurring outside that they truly do not want you to know about.”

“Indeed. Someone has blocked my every attempt to contact Father and the others. I did not expect to be put under lock and key like this.” I sighed, then resumed my work on the magic circle. “Still, why was I not born as Ortwin?”

“Would you care to elaborate?” Oderkunst asked, cocking an eyebrow while he placed some Wind-rich materials before me. He had deduced that I would need them after looking at my circle.

“Had I ended up in the same grade as Lady Rozemyne, I expect that my student days would have been eventful and deeply entertaining. Furthermore, men are at least allowed to pursue their dreams, are they not?”

Even men could end up forced into political marriages, but they were much less likely to find themselves engaged and en route to another duchy in the blink of an eye. A man who had worked tirelessly to become the next aub and achieved grades befitting the role would never have been sent away from Drewanchel.

“In any case, what charm are you making?” Oderkunst asked.

“This should answer your question,” I replied, then drew a sigil.

“Lady Adolphine, I would ask that you not gift your husband a charm dedicated to Jugereise the Goddess of Separation.”

“This is for my own purposes. I would never present such an obvious weakness for him to exploit.”

My charm for Prince Sigiswald would be dedicated to another god, though I was still trying to decide which. I was caught between Gebordnung the Goddess of Order, so that he would cease prioritizing his own convenience above all else when making decisions, or Erwachlehen the God of Guidance, in the hope that he might improve his personality more generally and actually become suited to rule.

“I would rather you not make it for yourself either,” Oderkunst said, but I pretended not to hear him.

I remained in isolation for the remainder of the Archduke Conference. Only on the final day was I allowed to leave the villa, and only to give my farewells and observe the Dedication Ritual that was apparently being held. I had asked why the ritual was happening to begin with, but the other members of the royal family had merely smiled and said that they would explain later. I was made to participate—and, once again, I was entirely unprepared.

I spent the last few moments of the conference aghast, unable to believe the rumors that were flying about. Never in my life had I thought it would be so difficult to smile and pretend that I wasn’t completely oblivious.

“Prince Sigiswald, I demand answers,” I said. My scholars were just as shocked and already scrambling to collect as much intelligence as they could. I, however, would go straight to the source.

“Ah, perfect timing. I was just about to tell you the decisions we made.”

I was taken to a separate room and arrived to find that the prince’s second wife, Lady Nahelache, was there already. She wore a bubbly smile, but I simply could not get along with her. The way we lived, our perspectives on things, and the goals we worked toward were wholly incompatible.

“The king will adopt Rozemyne so that she can obtain the Gruttrissheit for us,” Prince Sigiswald informed me. “I shall take her as my third wife once she comes of age.”

What nonsense is he saying this time?

“My apologies, but could you elaborate? How did that come to pass?”

“While you were leisurely resting in my villa, the Archduke Conference became quite frantic.”

It was almost comical to hear such words from someone who had stationed guards around the villa to keep me from leaving. Rather than being made to “rest,” I would have liked to be included in this ridiculous plan. Instead, I was only finding out about it after the fact.

I simply do not have the resources and people I need. I am at an overwhelming disadvantage here.

“Prince Sigiswald, allow me to confirm something: Am I supposed to feel respected as your wife when you are doing things like this?”

“Oh? I thought it obvious that, as the future Zent, I must involve myself with anyone who can obtain the Gruttrissheit. My kingship is the foundation of our contract with Drewanchel, you know. But of course, if you, my first wife, were to secure it for me instead, that would definitely be ideal.”

In other words, “Don’t complain unless you can get me the Gruttrissheit.” Do you not realize that, as Yurgenschmidt’s next ruler, you should acquire it yourself and through your own power?

Lady Rozemyne obtaining the Gruttrissheit, the literal mark of the sovereign, would make *her* the next Zent, not Prince Sigiswald. Was he not ashamed by the mere thought of taking her as his third wife to become king?

“In any case,” he said, “this matter has been settled.”

“Nothing matters more than making Prince Sigiswald the next Zent,” Lady Nahelache added, still wearing the same spirited smile.

"I will do everything I can to help." One could guess that she cared only about preserving her current lifestyle.

"I assume that Lady Rozemyne and Aub Ehrenfest agreed, then?" I asked.

"They had various conditions, but we managed to come to an amicable agreement. The experience taught me that Anastasius was entirely correct: Rozemyne's upbringing in the temple of a lesser duchy has made her almost impossible to converse with. Trying to deal with her was exhausting. She has no common sense whatsoever."

She must have more than you, and she must be easier to communicate with.

Prince Sigiswald shook his head and shrugged, seeking some agreement, but his words irritated me so much that I responded only with a cold glare.

"It must have been very unpleasant dealing with such a strange child," Lady Nahelache said, coming to the prince's aid. I could venture that his experience had been nothing compared to what Lady Rozemyne had been through, having to stomach the royal family's attempts to bully her into submission.

"We must spend the next year preparing to welcome her as the king's adopted daughter," Prince Sigiswald explained. "I would appreciate your assistance, Adolphine, but perhaps you would find it too difficult. It was only recently that you became a royal yourself."

Just how scant is your common sense? The problem is not how demanding the task might be but the fact that you are attempting to unload it onto me in the first place. How do you not realize this?

I was struck with the urge to confront the first prince's tutor over his evident failure to do his job, but I quickly suppressed it. "You are not adopting Lady Rozemyne—the Zent is. Preparing for her entrance to the royal family should thereby fall to *his* first wife. If you are not marrying her right away, would it not give the wrong impression for you to welcome her?"

"Yes, she is going to join the royal family as the king's adopted daughter, but we must have the public believe that we are welcoming her as my third wife. Anastasius is much closer to Rozemyne than I, and we do not want the country's nobles to assume that *he* will marry her when she comes of age."

In other words, he did not want Prince Anastasius to take her

from him as he had taken Lady Eglantine. He was no doubt acting on a strong impulse to keep the one who would obtain the Grutrissheit within his sphere of power.

Hm... It would seem that this arrangement for Lady Rozemyne to marry Prince Sigiswald is still no more than a verbal agreement.

Had it been the Zent's will, then Prince Sigiswald would not have needed to consider his brother an enemy. My heart went out to Lady Rozemyne; like me, she was at the whim of the first prince's arrogance. I could not help feeling that there was an unspoken companionship between us.

If she does end up joining the royal family... perhaps we could do research together.

That raised my spirits a little. At the very least, I would ensure that Lady Rozemyne lived in relative comfort until she came of age and was forced to move into Prince Sigiswald's villa.

"I do not mind providing my assistance," I said, "but as an adopted daughter, will she not receive her own villa? I wonder, which one will she be given? The ones in the Sovereignty are all in use, are they not?"

"We plan to give her a villa on the Royal Academy's grounds. Raublut has just been given the key so that he can investigate it. In the process, the building will be furnished, cleaned, and the like. It should not take as long to prepare as a normal villa would. Plus, there is its proximity to the library that Lady Rozemyne is so fond of."

Does the Royal Academy's library not close after the Archduke Conference? Do they intend to keep it open year-round for her sake?

In any case, Prince Sigiswald seemed fairly invested in Lady Rozemyne now that he believed she could obtain the Grutrissheit. Comparing her treatment to mine made me want to sigh, but once again, I repressed my dissatisfaction.

The prince continued, "I expect the next year to be quite taxing, but Rozemyne's adoption should ease the burden on us all. At the very least, she will make for an excellent source of mana."

He was so consistently self-centered that my head started to ache. I clenched my newly made charm and, without a moment's hesitation, began to pour my mana into it.

O Jugerise the Goddess of Separation, I beseech you! Bring down your divine instrument and sever the foul ties that bind me so!

Schlaftraum's Flowers

"Well, Solange, I am done for today. Let us meet tomorrow as the Goddess of Light rises."

"Take care, Hortensia. As the Goddess of Light rises."

After exchanging farewells with Solange, I started toward the central building. Now that the students had returned to their duchies, I would commute between my home and the Royal Academy instead of using the library dormitory.

My current duties included organizing the closed-stack archives and repairing damaged books—tasks we did not have time for during the academic year. There was no shortage of work to be done either; Schwartz and Weiss had been inactive for so long that many sections of the library were now neglected. There were also plans for the royal family and members of the Library Committee to start going through the documents in the underground archive during the Archduke Conference, so we would need to prepare for that as well.

I had only volunteered for this librarian job at the request of my husband, but now I valued and took pride in my work.

"I have returned," I announced to my head attendant, as I always did upon returning home. But it was Lord Raublut who came to greet me. I could not remember the last time he had welcomed me home, if ever; as the Sovereign knight commander, he was at work more often than not.

"Oh my, Lord Raublut. Is everything okay?"

"There's something I want to ask you in private," he said.

"Come to my room before dinner."

Now this was *exceptionally* rare. I could only wonder what had caused all this. I went to my room to change, then hurried to see my husband.

"Attendants, clear the room," he said. "Hortensia, hold this."

I swallowed; we were at home, so his decision to clear the room of attendants and use sound-blocking magic tools indicated grave circumstances. Something quite severe must have happened.

“An ancient magic tool in the palace—one we stopped supplying after the civil war, since it appeared not to be in use—has completely dissolved.”

“A magic tool dissolved simply because it ran out of mana? That is...”

If one stopped supplying a magic tool meant to illuminate a room, the light would merely turn off. I had never heard of a magic tool dissolving from neglect.

“Magic tools formed purely of magic, such as foundations and those meant to protect buildings, apparently do break upon running out of mana,” my husband explained.

“Oh, how terrible!” I cried. “Do you mean to say that a building collapsed as well?!”

“Indeed. A small tower that was being used for storage dissolved into white sand. It threw the palace into a frenzy. The scholars are checking all of the remaining buildings to ensure that none of them meet the same fate, while the royal family is supplying any dangerous-seeming foundation they come across with mana.”

Lord Raublut spoke so flatly that one might assume there was no frenzy at all, but one of the palace’s towers crumbling was an enormously significant event.

He continued, “The king has declared that the magic tools in the Royal Academy’s library must be checked as well. Now that we know its archive contains valuable documents, we cannot afford to let it collapse. Could you complete those checks before the Archduke Conference? Stay in the library dormitory if you must. The royal family will supply any tools that need mana during the conference.”

“Oh, I should not need to stay there. The Royal Academy’s library is going to be fine. I investigated its magic tools with Raimund, at Lady Rozemyne’s request. Its foundation equivalent was in danger, but Lady Rozemyne refilled it using the mana left over from the Dedication Ritual. You may let the Zent know.”

I had hoped to ease Lord Raublut’s concerns, but his brow furrowed even deeper. “It was my understanding that magic tools like the foundations required royal mana. Ah, but I suppose the royal family *did* participate in that Dedication Ritual. Did a portion of the mana given belong to them, then...?”

I had desperately tried to restore the library’s protective magic

tool myself, only to panic when my best efforts did nothing to change its color. Had the issue been my lack of royal mana, not the size of my offering?

As I mentally took inventory of the library's magic tools, Lord Raublut raised an eyebrow in apparent realization. "Hortensia... Librarians are scholars too, correct? Can I assume you have the authority to enter the scholar building?"

"Hm? Oh, yes. Nobody who saw me enter would consider it strange."

To be frank, I doubted that anyone would notice my entrance to begin with. The professors of the scholar course who stayed at the Royal Academy between school terms instead of returning to the Sovereignty were all too obsessed with their research to pay attention to anything else.

"In that case, my apologies, but I would ask you to check the scholar building alongside the library and the library dormitory. Professors of the knight and attendant courses are quick to respond to orders, but those of the scholar course still at the Royal Academy will refuse to do anything but their research."

I gave a wry smile and nodded; he had good reason to be concerned. Ordering the scholars to check their building's magic tools before the royal family arrived for the Archduke Conference would achieve painfully little. At best, they would procrastinate until the conference was already upon them.

"During the Archduke Conference, the royal family intends to visit the underground archive," Lord Raublut informed me. "I am sure you have preparations to make, so I must ask you to stay in the library dormitory until then."

"Very well. I shall accept this as an order from the Zent."

The day after my discussion with Lord Raublut, I prepared to return to the library dormitory. I was to stay there until the Archduke Conference, but with help from Raimund, I had already checked the use and mana supply of the magic tools in the library. In the first place, each building only had one foundation-esque tool.

I did not have much to do in preparation for the Archduke Conference either. The rest area outside the archive would need to be cleaned, I would need to consult with Solange on how far inside the library dormitory the attendants preparing lunch and tea were permitted to go, then we would need to find a resting spot for the

accompanying retainers. We librarians could not enter the archive ourselves, so we had to leave that to Schwartz and Weiss.

“I suppose that gives me more time to focus on repairs, and not having to think about my daily commute is nice, but... To be honest, there is not nearly enough work to justify staying in the dormitory.”

Staying in the dormitory meant I could only have one attendant with me, as even professors were limited in that regard. I had chosen Dirmira, and we had more than enough luggage between us.

“Do you think Lord Raublut might be inviting another woman to the house while you are absent?” she asked.

“Again with this? Have you forgotten just how long we have been husband and wife?”

Dirmira had served me since before I married Lord Raublut. We were the same age, and close friends. Her most unusual trait was her long-standing disdain for my husband and his head attendant. No matter how many years passed, her bizarre frustrations remained.

Immediately after my wedding to Lord Raublut, his head attendant had approached me and said in no uncertain terms, “You would do well to know that my lord already has someone he cannot forget.” His words had come as no surprise to me, and they had meant just as little; I was not seeking love to begin with.

Dirmira, on the other hand, was still angry about it. “What a thing to say to a bride visiting her new home for the first time!” she seethed, no less furious than when she had witnessed it. “When it comes time for me to ascend the towering stairway, I *will* raise a complaint with the gods!”

“And I am sure they will find your vindictiveness just as troubling as I do.”

We teleported to the Royal Academy via a circle in the royal palace, then started walking from the central building to the library dormitory. Along the way, we happened upon knights of the Sovereign Order. At their head was Loyalitat, the vice commander.

“Oh my. Lord Loyalitat.”

“Lady Hortensia. It has been too long. I... heard you were assigned to the Royal Academy’s library, but what brings you here with luggage and an attendant?”

“By royal decree, I will be staying in the library dormitory until the Archduke Conference. I am to investigate some magic tools.”

He nodded, having immediately understood me. “The commander did return home for that purpose, now that you mention it. We are quite busy ourselves; on top of all the incidents we have to deal with these days, we no longer have you to assist the commander with his paperwork.” He shrugged and added, “He always puts it off whenever he can.”

A smile crept onto my lips. “I wish you all the best of luck,” I said.

I had married Lord Raublut after losing both my lord and my life as a retainer. By then, I was too old to bear children, leaving me with little else to do but assist my husband with his paperwork and start brewing rejuvenation potions and magic tools.

“And what brings you here?” I asked. “It is rare to see you all at the Royal Academy.”

“We are revising our security in the run-up to the Archduke Conference. There is less to do compared to last year, when we had to keep our sights on Old Werkestock’s dormitory on top of everything else, but... as you may know, Lady Rozemyne is to perform this year’s Starbind Ceremony as the High Bishop. We need to review our plans with that in mind, and work out the details with the Sovereign temple.”

The Sovereign High Bishop was furious about the situation, especially because the Sovereign High Priest was looking to permanently replace him with a mana-rich archduke candidate for the sake of reviving the old ceremonies. The Sovereign temple had thus divided into two factions: those who supported the High Bishop, who refused to let the nobles steal away the last few duties they had; and those who supported the High Priest, who was determined to exploit the nobility for the sake of reviving the old rituals and restoring the temple to its former glory.

“Lady Rozemyne is coming to the Archduke Conference to serve as High Bishop?” I repeated. “Oh my. This is news to me.” I had known that she was coming to transcribe and translate documents in the underground archive, but this was my first time hearing about her plans to perform the Starbind Ceremony.

“At the royal family’s request, I am told. They wish for Prince Sigiswald to receive a true blessing during his Starbinding, since he is to become the next king. Accommodating this sudden turn of events has been no easy feat.”

“Hold on,” one of the knights interjected. “I thought Lady

Rozemyne demanded to serve as High Bishop so she could show the Sovereign temple what real blessings were like.”

“What?! Who told you that?!” another knight barked. “Her only requests were for the royal family to obtain the Sovereign temple’s agreement and increase security for the event. It was the least they could do, after all.”

“Do you not think it presumptuous that she made demands of the royal family?”

“Come on. It’s obvious that Lady Rozemyne’s arrival will cause a stir of some kind. Anyone in her position would make the same requests.”

I stared at the quarreling knights for a moment, then said, “It would appear that even the Sovereign Knight’s Order is experiencing a communication failure. You share neither knowledge nor opinions.”

Those of the Knight’s Order were always given the same, consolidated intelligence so that they could obey the Zent’s will without hesitation. Public discourse meant nothing to them; they were only concerned with the opinions of the throne.

“The Knight’s Order is in partial disarray at the moment,” Lord Loyalitat explained. I was not privy to the details, but it had reached my ear that a few Sovereign knights had gone rogue during the winter. “It has become increasingly common for even the commander to act alone, I would assume as the result of confidential orders from the Zent. He wanted to perform the preliminary investigation of that villa on his own, and only a few of us were informed about his plan to return home to communicate the Zent’s will to you.”

“My, my... I understand the need to keep intelligence confidential, but how can you knights relax when your commander is acting in such a manner...?” It seemed that mutual distrust was running rampant throughout the Sovereign Knight’s Order.

“Lady Hortensia, perhaps you should be wary of staying at the Academy for such an extended period,” one of the knights said. “The commander might bring another woman home.”

“You believe so too?!” exclaimed not I, but my attendant Dirmira.

The knight froze. “Er, my apologies. I was only speaking in jest...”

“But you would not have said it without good cause. Am I

wrong?" she demanded, causing the knights to all step back.

"Um, Lady Hortensia..." Lord Loyaltat said, "did something happen between you and the commander?"

"A few rude words were spoken more than a decade ago, after we married. That is all. Dirmira has been like this ever since."

The vice commander stifled a laugh by clearing his throat, then turned to my attendant. "Fear not. There is nothing to be concerned about. Lord Raublut is a loyal husband."

Lord Loyaltat went on to explain that, around this time last year, a horde of feybeasts had appeared while the Order was investigating Old Werkestock. The knights had participated in slaying them.

"We needed to do battle to progress our investigation," he said, "but, well... There are some knights who require the comfort of a woman after such vicious fighting. Ahrensbach's first wife informed us that Schlaftraum's flowers were blooming wonderfully that year, then took us to a private location. As the knights chose their women, Lord Raublut pointed to a vase filled with white flowers. He said they were so beautiful that he would rather have them instead."

"I think we can all agree that Lord Raublut would *never* take an interest in flowers," Dirmira snapped, evidently skeptical. "Were they truly to his tastes?"

The knights scrunched up their faces, trying not to burst out laughing. Lord Loyaltat alone maintained a completely straight face as he said, "Most likely. It seemed to me that he had a strong sentimental attachment to them." The vice commander certainly had an iron will.

I paused. "That said, I do not recall Lord Raublut bringing any white flowers home. Do you, Dirmira?" They surely would have stood out, but neither one of us had seen any.

"Perhaps he was hesitant to bring home flowers he obtained elsewhere?" Lord Loyaltat ventured.

"To think he was capable of such consideration..."

"Well, they were in a vase, were they not?" Dirmira said. "They must have just withered. He is trying to deceive you, Lady Hortensia."

I came close to a chuckle but managed to stop myself.

Lord Loyaltat shook his head, wearing a guilty smile. "Believe what you will, but the commander is loyal to his wife. You have my

word. Lady Hortensia, I will ensure that the knights do not speak out of turn again.”

After making the knights apologize, the vice commander took his leave, clearly eager to part with Dirmira. Even as we resumed our journey to the library, she looked entirely unconvinced.

As expected, it did not take long at all to inspect the magic tools in the library and the scholar building. I noted down and reported the location and mana quantity of each place’s foundation equivalent, then got to work airing out and repairing documents from the second closed-stack archive.

“Solange, these documents are frequently borrowed,” I said. “What say we move them to the reading room?”

“A fine suggestion. It certainly is time-consuming having to unlock the door every time someone wishes to borrow them.”

We had Schwartz and Weiss reregister the documents’ location, then arranged them on the shelves in the reading room.

“Several years ago, I would never have imagined that so many professors would one day return to prewar lesson plans,” Solange mused aloud. “Could it be that Professor Fraularm influenced them?”

“It speaks to how much Yurgenschmidt has calmed down that the coursework of executed professors can finally be used,” I replied. Indeed, it was wonderful, but the documents that had already been lost would never return. The archive was far emptier than when I was at the Royal Academy.

“User. Here.”

“Guiding user.”

The two shumils had suddenly spoken. Only the professors of the scholar course came to the library at this time; which one of them was here now? They often made unreasonable demands of Solange, who was only a mednoble, so I decided to step forward.

“I shall welcome them in the entrance hall,” I said. “Solange, continue your work here.”

I made my way out of the reading room and opened the door in the entrance hall. Then, after a short wait, a group clad in black capes arrived. But these were no professors.

“Oh, Prince Anastasius. What brings you here?” I asked, taken aback by his unexpected appearance. He had not given any notice and was with only a small group of retainers, which suggested that

he was visiting in secret. “Could it be that you are here to supply mana to the scholar building?”

The prince shook his head. “No, there is something urgent I want you to investigate. Do you have somewhere we can speak in private?”

“In that case, the office would do better than the reading room.”

I guided them inside, at which point Prince Anastasius made his retainers step back and gave me a sound-blocking magic tool. He did not want even his own entourage to hear us, which made me understandably nervous.

“I do not want to involve the Knight’s Order in this matter,” he said. “I am aware that your husband was the reason you became a librarian, but first, I must ask you to sign these.” He put two magic contracts before me, one a declaration of my loyalty to the king and the other a vow of secrecy. How troubling.

“I am afraid that I cannot sign the contract swearing my loyalty to the king.”

“You cannot?!” Prince Anastasius barked, wide-eyed, his voice mixed with surprise and anger. “Hortensia...!”

“When I became a librarian and a guardian of knowledge, I vowed to obey Mestionora the Goddess of Wisdom. Swearing loyalty to another, even the Zent, would violate our contract. I have no intention of acting against the royal family... but I cannot sign that.”

“What is a ‘guardian of knowledge?’”

I did my best to explain.

“Thus,” I concluded, “I became a guardian of knowledge both to obtain a key to the underground archive and to assist the royal family with acquiring the Grutrissheit. Is my loyalty still not apparent? Will you have me executed as the archlibrarians were after the civil war’s purge?”

I went on to note that the executed archlibrarians had also been guardians of knowledge, which had prevented them from signing magic contracts to prove their loyalty to the Zent.

Prince Anastasius stared at me in shock. “That was not known to me... I shudder at our own mercilessness.”

“The librarians in question were from Old Werkestock, so they were quickly deemed to be threats when they refused to swear their loyalty to King Trauerqual. I am from Klassenberg, and my lord was

the late Prince Waldifrid; I can at least partially sympathize with the royal family's predicament back then."

There had been a time when the royal family faced one betrayal after another, to the point that they could no longer trust any of the people around them. The circumstances had necessitated extreme caution toward those of enemy duchies, and it was reasonable to be wary of those who could not even sign a loyalty contract.

"In any case," I continued, "while it was your family who ordered the purge, you were but a child at the time, not even old enough to have been baptized. Although it is important to remember the past, the blame for those deaths does not rest on your shoulders. But you *are* accountable for what happens next."

Prince Anastasius glared at the contract. For most, swearing loyalty to the king was simple, so this was presumably the first time he had encountered an issue. It was clear as day that he was now racking his brain for how to deal with someone who was obedient but unable to prove it.

"Prince Anastasius, while I cannot sign your loyalty contract, I can at least sign this vow of silence."

"That will do, then."

Once the contract was signed, Prince Anastasius told me that Sovereign knights had interrupted a Royal Academy dinner game, even dragging students from lesser and middle duchies into the mix. It was suspected that a plant known as trug was involved.

"A dangerous plant that gives off a sweet smell when dried and burned, and which produces hallucinations, intoxication, and disturbing memories...?"

"Yes," the prince said. "That is what Ehrenfest has told us, but we cannot act on their word alone. If we make our accusation without evidence, some will say that Ehrenfest orchestrated it themselves to move against the Sovereign Knight's Order. Father has ordered me to obtain the proof we require in complete secrecy."

Many viewed Ehrenfest with hostility and suspicion, but none more than my husband, Lord Raublut. His reason for sending me to the library in the first place was to investigate the duchy's intentions.

Prince Anastasius continued, "We had the palace library scoured for information about the plant, but we found not even a single mention. We *did* come across a lead, though—a scholar older than fifty remembered being taught about trug by his herbology

professor. The professor retired before the scholar's graduation. I raised this with one of the palace librarians, and they replied that the Royal Academy's library was more likely to have documents relating to a professor's studies."

That librarian was correct; there was a much better chance of a professor's coursework being held in the Royal Academy than the palace library. Still, it was surprising that the latter had contained not even a single reference to the plant they were searching for; trug had to be rare indeed.

"It is possible to find course-related materials by specifying a professor," I said. "And if we are fortunate enough for this herbologist's disciples to have preserved his documents, then we might even come across the names of scholars who took his course. I do not expect many to have taken a class specializing in rare herbs, but surely there were some."

"I see," Prince Anastasius said. He appeared to be hopeful, which simply would not do; I did not want him setting himself up for disappointment.

"However," I went on, "depending on where they were born, it is more than likely that the professor and his disciples were executed and the documents lost, especially with the complete lack of relevant materials in the palace library. I will search everything, including study guides left by students of other duchies, but there is no guarantee that I will find what you seek."

The executed archscholars had dedicated their final moments to preserving as many documents as possible, but not everything had ended up in the third archive. Solange had said it was only natural that some would be missed.

"Just do all that you can. We are counting on you."

After saying farewell to Prince Anastasius, I started identifying herbology professors with the help of Schwartz and Weiss. Because I already knew the generation in which he had retired, finding the man we were looking for was especially easy—as was finding the name of the disciple who had inherited his work.

It was just as I suspected, though. The disciple had already been executed.

Next, I went through every herbology document in the reading room and the second closed-stack archive, hoping to see whether anyone had continued the professor's work. It appeared not. In fact,

the new lesson plan incorporated nothing from its predecessor; there were very few descriptions of rare herbs, with the research instead focusing on how to grow each duchy's specialty herbs in other territories.

"I can only hope for success in the third closed-stack archive..." I said to myself, making my way there with Schwartz and Weiss. This third archive contained research documents from those executed as political criminals.

Again, I searched through documents with Schwartz and Weiss, but not a single one belonged to the professor. There were no records about trug to be found.

"Hm... If the plant is so rare, could it have been known by another name?" I changed my approach, this time searching for records of anything that produced similar effects.

"Hortensia, here," Weiss said, holding out a document—specifically a diary from two hundred years ago. It described a drug that seemed to tick the right boxes, most commonly used on women of a particular position. One of the ingredients listed was "Schlaftraum's flower," and that was it.

"Schlaftraum's flower"? Is that still what they call it in Ahrensbach?

Once again, I updated my search, but there were no other mentions of Schlaftraum's flowers being used as an ingredient for a drug.

To think this is all that remains... Just how many valuable documents were lost in the purge?

Once my investigation settled down, I sent word to Prince Anastasius, then began to contemplate the state of my home. As the commander of the Sovereign Knight's Order, my husband was rarely ever there, and my own absence made me wonder whether our attendants were having any trouble guarding the place by themselves.

"I understand your concern," Dirmira said. "It makes me uneasy to leave anything in the hands of that head attendant."

"How many times have I told you not to speak about him like that?"

"You cannot count on him to tell you whether Lord Raublut is bringing another woman into your house, Lady Hortensia." All of a sudden, there was an amused twinkle in her eye. "You know... This is an opportunity. You could return home under the guise of having

forgotten something.”

She was right that Lord Raublut’s head attendant would prioritize his lord over me—but there was nothing strange about that, considering the length of their relationship.

Besides, Dirmira is exactly the same with me.

“I see no reason to do that. Go alone, if you must. You have grown rather tired of dormitory life, have you not? I permit you one day of leave to stock up on soap and makeup.”

After sending Dirmira home on business, I would spend the day she was absent working in the library’s reading room.

“Welcome back, Dirmira,” I said upon her return. “Was there another woman in my home, by chance?”

“Not a woman, no. The Sovereign High Priest.”

She had arrived to find my husband in some manner of negotiation, wherein the Sovereign High Priest had apparently said, “If you can promise me Ehrenfest’s flower in return, then...”

“I was only close when I poured them tea, so I don’t know what their negotiation was about,” Dirmira informed me. “But your husband was wearing a fake noble smile, even though he never usually smiles at all. It made me believe he was forming some kind of evil scheme. He looked like a villain, not a knight commander.”

I understood how she felt. Perhaps due to the scar above his cheek, Lord Raublut’s face turned into something fiendish whenever he smiled.

“For him to have gone to such lengths, it must have been to do with work,” I said. “Lord Loyaltat said just the other day that the Order has been engaged in more frequent negotiations with the Sovereign temple as a result of the Starbind Ceremony.”

“That’s true, but such business is always carried out by a group of knights. I thought it strange that Lord Raublut was acting alone.”

Indeed, the Knight’s Order always had several people take part in its negotiations and investigations; this helped to prevent any subterfuge or personal feelings that might get in the way. I found it hard to believe that my husband would violate that rule.

“Perhaps they were absent from the table during the brief moment you were there,” I suggested.

“The number of cups suggested otherwise, and the head attendant mentioned no other guests. Isn’t this suspicious?”

“You might think so, but why would he be speaking to the

Sovereign High Priest if not for work?" The royal family's relationship with the Sovereign temple had been strained ever since the civil war—and my husband, as a servant of the Zent, had never been on good terms with them either. The very idea that he had suddenly befriended and was casually meeting with someone of the temple was laughable.

"Lord Loyaltat *did* say that he has been operating on his own more as of late, which must have something to do with his work. At the very least, the exchange I came across did not seem romantic in nature."

"Oh my, Dirmira. Whatever are you saying?"

We looked at each other and laughed. In any case, I was relieved to know that everything was okay at home.

Before the Archduke Conference, Prince Anastasius visited the library to ask about the results of my research. He looked especially busy. I was handed a sound-blocker as we entered my office, then I took a seat across from him.

"In conclusion, no records remain of the work done by the professor in question," I said. "His disciple was from Werkestock."

"I see..." the prince replied, his shoulders slumped. His eyes then wandered to the pile of documents beside me.

"I could not find any mention of a plant called 'trug' in the Royal Academy's library. However, by investigating records of drugs and ingredients with similar effects, I was able to produce some meaningful results." I picked up one of the documents and turned to a page I had bookmarked. "Prince Anastasius, are you familiar with Schlaftraum's flower?"

"No. But I assume that the decision to name them after the God of Dreams, subordinate to the God of Life, is significant in some way. A code, perhaps. Or some kind of euphemism."

"Quite. This is a record from two hundred years ago, when it seemed to be a euphemism for a drug ingredient. The drug was used on select women who served as partners to the royal family and the aubs." I pointed at one line in particular. "The author of this diary wished to secure the ingredient but was unable, for it was grown in a place that was not easily accessible."

Prince Anastasius looked it over, then frowned. "And you believe this could be referring to trug?"

"I do, but I cannot say for sure. This was the only mention of

‘Schlaftraum’s flowers’ being used as an ingredient for a drug. From there, I started to investigate the term. As generations passed, it went from being the name of an ingredient to a moniker for a certain group of women. There are many more records of this latter usage.”

I pointed to various examples in another text and read them aloud. “‘During the Archduke Conference, Aub Werkestock received an invite marked with a white blossom—an invitation from one of Schlaftraum’s flowers. How I wish to obtain one myself.’ And over here, ‘The second prince sought one of Schlaftraum’s flowers but was refused.’”

I continued, “As I understand it, a hundred-some years ago, there existed a facility where women would invite archdukes and members of the royal family to bed with them. Those women were known as Schlaftraum’s flowers. It is hard to say why they were named after an ingredient for a drug. One theory is that they used the drug themselves, but the truth remains uncertain.”

The prince grimaced in displeasure. Perhaps the tale was too extreme for him, or he was too virtuous not to automatically disapprove.

“Prince Anastasius, you might learn more about the drug and its ingredients if you research Schlaftraum’s flowers in the palace library. Or do you already have an idea? I was Prince Waldifrid’s scholar for a very long time, but not once did I hear of such flowers or see a blossom-marked invitation.” The records were only a hundred years old, but such information had never come up in the royal palace, not even as a tale of the past.

“Neither have I,” the prince replied. “I would assume they are connected to flower offerings. Could the facility have been in the Sovereign temple?”

“The Sovereign temple would not have had the authority to serve only aubs and the royal family. Even professors of the Royal Academy can enter as they please. Maybe things were different generations ago, but any changes of that nature would absolutely be mentioned in the Sovereign temple’s records.”

Any connection between Schlaftraum’s flowers and the temple’s flower offerings would not be recorded in the Academy’s library. Prince Anastasius must have taken the hint, because he smiled and said, “I will research Schlaftraum’s flowers in the palace library. Your assistance is appreciated.” But as he went to stand, I quickly

called out.

“One moment, please. It would seem that the term ‘Schlaftraum’s flowers’ now applies to the women given to knights after battle.”

The prince frowned, clearly skeptical. “I have never heard it used like that.” Neither the Knight’s Order nor Klassenberg had ever used the term in that way either; it was new to me as well.

“I had not either until the other day. I was told that last year, after the Knight’s Order slew the feybeasts that interrupted their investigation into Old Werkestock, Ahrensbach used the term to describe the women it provided.”

“Ahrensbach, you say?” Prince Anastasius cocked an eyebrow. It was so unlike his previous reactions that I could not help but blink at him curiously.

“Do you know something?”

“No, its mention merely surprised me. Erm... what did the knights say? Did they see any rare plants in Ahrensbach or notice any sweet-smelling smoke?”

I was about to say that he could ask them himself when I remembered that he did not want to involve the Knight’s Order. “My apologies, but it came up only briefly during an exchange of pleasantries. That was several days ago, and I did not think it particularly important at the time. My memory of the conversation is far from perfect, but I think they said...”

Ahrensbach’s first wife had taken the knights somewhere, saying that Schlaftraum’s flowers were blooming beautifully that year. Lord Raublut had then refused to take part; he had wanted a vase of white flowers instead.

“Hm. My apologies, but could you see whether the term ‘Schlaftraum’s flower’ is common in Ahrensbach?”

“Would you have me ask the duchy’s knights?”

“No, nothing so blatant. Just, uh... broach the subject casually and see how they react.”

That was easier said than done. I could engage in pleasantries with fellow professors, Sovereign nobles, and those from my home duchy, but how was I supposed to speak casually with nobles who never visited the library in the first place?

“I do not expect anyone from Ahrensbach to visit the library during the Archduke Conference,” I said, expressing my doubts. “You want me to be discreet, but would it not be unnatural to ask

them to visit or wait for them by the entrance to the meeting rooms? If you would not mind waiting until winter, I could ask the students, but I suspect the children are all too young to be of any use."

"I shall ensure that Detlinde or someone from her retinue visits the library. Ask them when they arrive. And could you possibly make it so that Rozemyne overhears your conversation? That girl manages to pick up information from the strangest places."

I could understand why he wanted to involve Lady Rozemyne; her insights were always so strange yet intriguingly nuanced.

"How am I to ask, though? I cannot just mention Schlaftraum's flowers out of the blue." To those from Ahrensbach, the term seemed to refer to women of a particular role. It was not something to mention lightly.

"Simply express your displeasure that your husband was introduced to and even took flowers from another woman. That would seem natural enough."

"Would it...?"

"Hortensia. *Your husband took flowers from another woman.* Even now, I imagine you are struggling to maintain your composure."

Oho, I see. Were he in my shoes, Prince Anastasius would surely be losing his mind right now. How cute.

I often heard rumors about the prince's intense love for Lady Eglantine, but this was my first time actually witnessing it. It was so... innocent. And youthful in a way that warmed my heart.

"Perhaps I could mimic you and pretend to be envious," I said. "Embarrassingly enough, I did not actually mind in the least; in fact, I was pleased that he received some flowers to his liking."

"Why do Klassenberg women always react like that?! Some jealousy is important for a couple! Your husband received white flowers from another woman, and gazed upon them sentimentally! It is clear that..."

Thus began a passionate lecture from the lovestruck prince.

I cleared my throat, interrupting Lady Detlinde's high-pitched cackling. "Lady Detlinde, if you would allow me to ask a question..." Then, in a voice clear enough for Lady Rozemyne to hear me: "Are Schlaftraum's flowers blossoming as beautifully as ever this year?"

"Schlaftraum's flowers'?"

“Oh, are you not familiar with them? They can only be obtained in Ahrensbach, and my husband is rather fond of them. Do ask Lady Georgine about them when you next get the chance.”

Lady Detlinde had not the only blank face; even her older, male guard knights were nonplussed. They wore looks not of outrage that I would mention such a topic to a young woman but of mild confusion, as though they had no idea what I was referring to. It was strange.

Is the term used only by those close to Lady Georgine, the first wife of Ahrensbach?

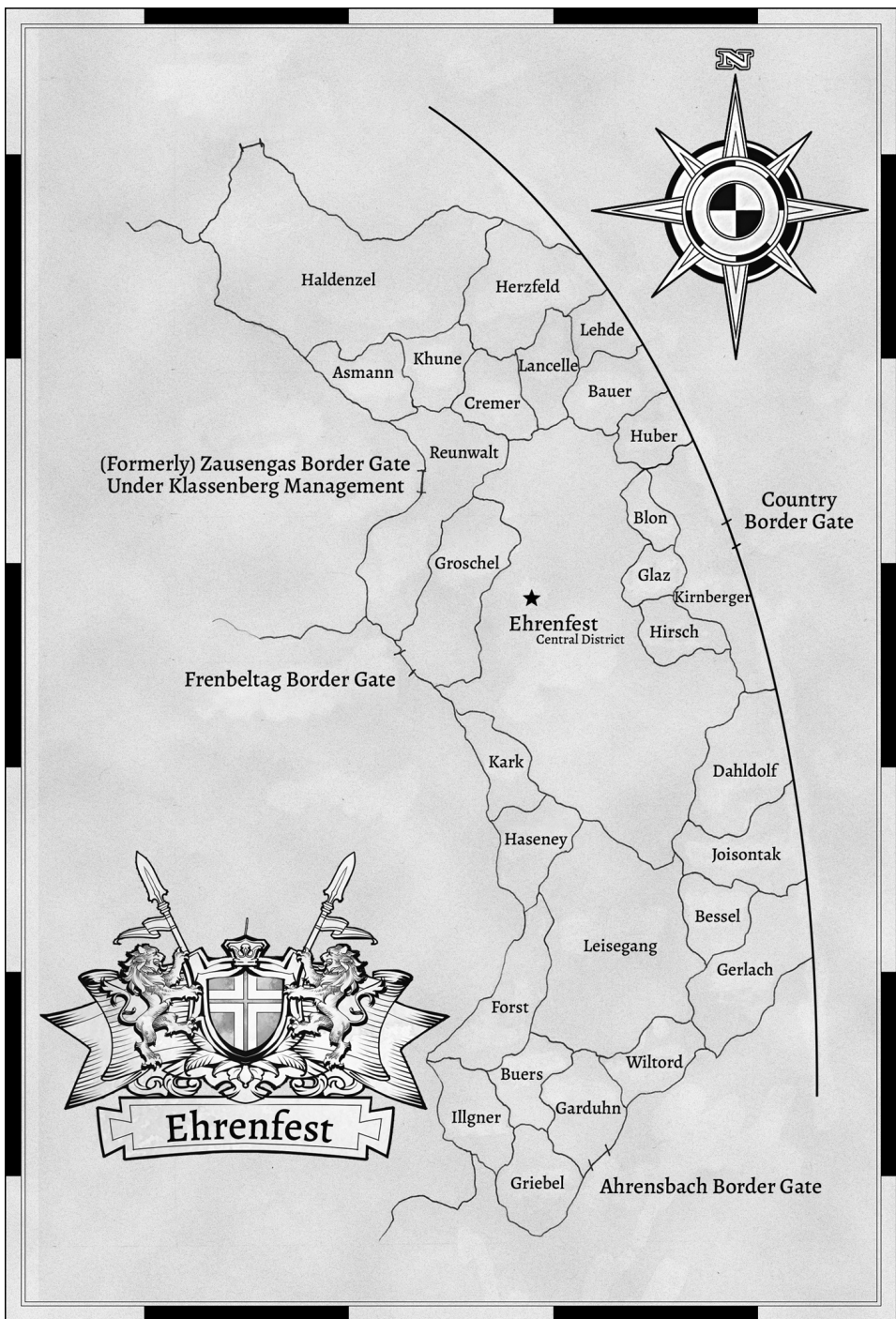
Immediately after my investigation, there was an incident in the underground archive. Then, during the Archduke Conference proper, a string of unexpected developments shook Yurgenschmidt to its very core. Suffice to say, I did not have a chance to report my modest findings to Prince Anastasius before the conference’s conclusion.

I imagine he will summon me again once things calm down.

Feeling more at ease, I cleaned the library with Solange, focusing in particular on the rest area by the underground archive—which had been especially busy—and the waiting room where the retainers unable to enter the archive had stayed. I also organized the office, tidied my room in the library dormitory, and supplied Schwartz and Weiss with mana. The entire process took several days.

It was not long before my time in the library dormitory came to an end. I returned home with Dirmira... and immediately upon my arrival, Lord Raublut summoned me to his room.

“Hortensia. Who told you about Schlaftraum’s flowers?”



N

Haldenzel

Herzfeld

Lehde

Asmann

Khune

Lancelle

Cremer

Bauer

Huber

(Formerly) Zausengas Border Gate
Under Klassenberg Management

Reunwalt

Blon

Country
Border Gate

Groschel

Glaz

Kirnberger

★
Ehrenfest
Central District

Hirsch

Frenbeltag Border Gate

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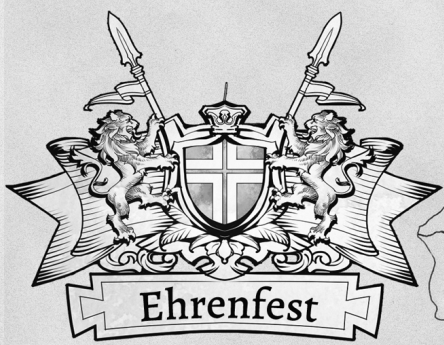
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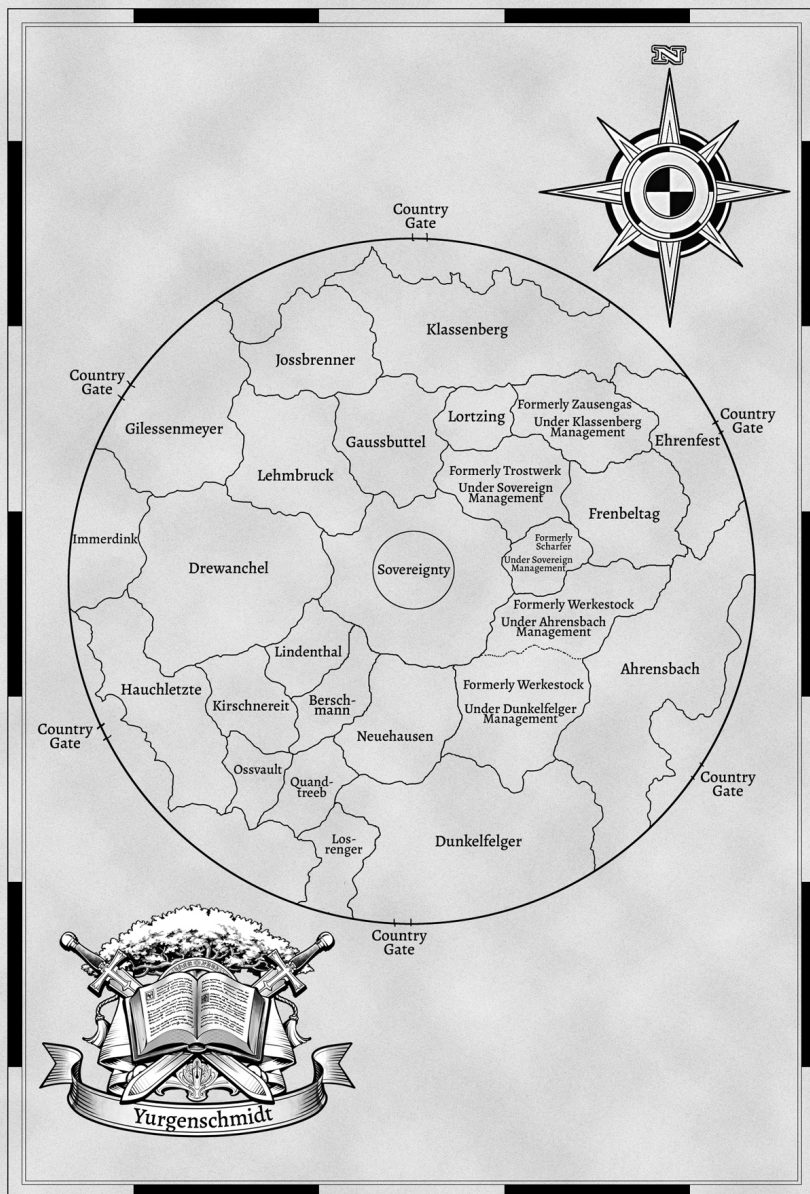
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Griebel

Ahrensbach Border Gate





Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading *Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Volume 5*.

This volume's prologue was written from Bonifatius's perspective. Despite being retired, he has been training the guard knights at Rozemyne's request, helping with administrative work in the castle, and even educating Wilfried for when he becomes the archduke. He's such a considerate grandfather.

The main story began with Melchior and the other children performing the fealty ceremony with Rozemyne naturally serving as the High Bishop. She participated in the same ceremony as a commoner all the way back at the start of Part 2. She sure has grown a lot since then, hasn't she?

This volume was all about the Archduke Conference, where members of the royal family and aubs from every duchy come together. Those who are underage are usually not allowed to attend, but Rozemyne was summoned to serve as High Bishop for the Starbind Ceremony and to translate the documents in the underground archive. Getting to speak with Hannelore after so long was a rare source of comfort during these trying times.

Rozemyne fled the library to get away from Detlinde, stumbled upon a shrine, then obtained a tablet of a divine color. There sure was a lot going on! After that chapter, many readers of the web novel version said that they wanted to know the words given by the gods, so I made sure to include them in the light novel.

From there, Rozemyne transformed into the merchant saint and took on Sigiswald, fighting to delay her adoption by a year and save Ferdinand from punishment by association. I think that chapter made it very clear how much of an influence Ferdinand and Benno have had on Rozemyne's growth... though it's hard to say how they would have reacted to seeing her in action! Would they have given her a thump on the head and cried, "You cannot/can't use those techniques against a prince!" Or would they have praised her for a job well done? (Hahahaha.)

This time, the epilogue was written from Hildebrand's perspective. As you might have noticed, he's in love with Rozemyne and displeased with his current engagement. He's desperate to have his wishes come true, but he's young and doesn't yet understand what's happening around him. What's going to happen now that he mentioned Schlaftraum's flowers to Raublut?

The first original short story in this volume was from Adolphine's perspective. I focused on how she feels about Sigiswald and the events that followed their wedding. She hasn't been thrilled about her political marriage from the start, as she wished to become the next Aub Drewanchel. How does her husband approach such a delicate situation...?

The second short story was written from Hortensia's perspective. It began with Raublut asking her to stay in the library dormitory to prepare for the Archduke Conference. She then investigated trug at Anastasius's orders, during which she found a connection to Schlaftraum's flowers.

Magdalena was the only character to receive a design for this volume. She's the Zent's third wife, Hildebrand's mother, and a true Dunkelfelgerian. The moment she learned that Heissshitze and the others had convinced her father to marry her to Ferdinand, whom they were desperate to bring into their duchy, she "proposed" to Trauerqual and secured an engagement with the royal family all on her own. She's quite strong.

This volume's cover art represents the circling of the Royal Academy's shrines. It includes three members of the royal family, the divine-colored slates, and one of the shrines, though you can't really see it behind the title. Rozemyne isn't wearing her usual school attire either, since it's the Archduke Conference and the end of spring. Compared to her black uniform, her colorful getup is so fresh and cute!

The color illustration depicts work in the underground archive. There's Rozemyne, Magdalena, Hildebrand, and Hannelore. This was Hannelore's first appearance in the story in quite a bit, so I made sure to ask that she be included. Thank you, Shiina-sama.

And finally, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. May we meet again in Part 5 Volume 6.

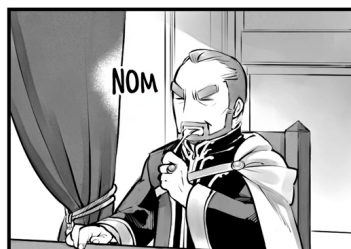
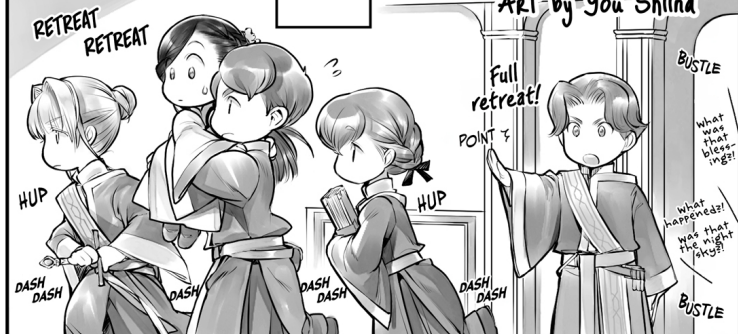
January 2021, Miya Kazuki

THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

RIGHT AFTER
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STARBIND
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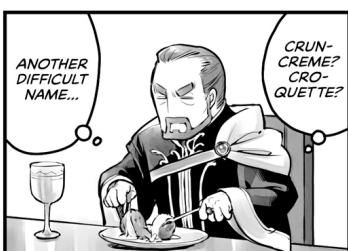
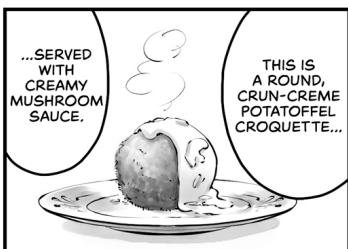
A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

Art by You Shiina



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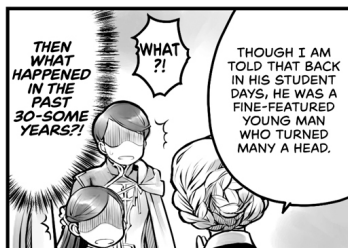
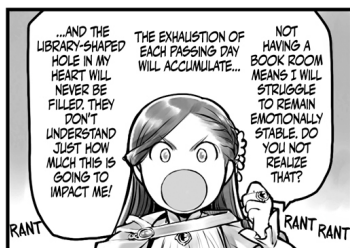
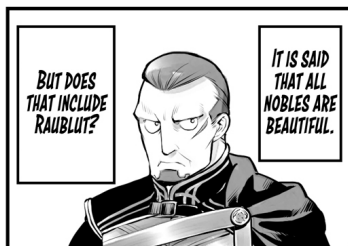
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THE MOST CRITICAL ISSUE



YES, IT DOES









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5 Ascendance of a Bookworm: Part 5 Avatar of a Goddess Volume
by Miya Kazuki

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Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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